



13

Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE ROSES OF TARTARUS

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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13 STRIKE THE BLOOD THE ROSES OF TARTARUS

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Yukina Himeragi

Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer

Kojou Akatsuki

The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire



Asagi Aiba

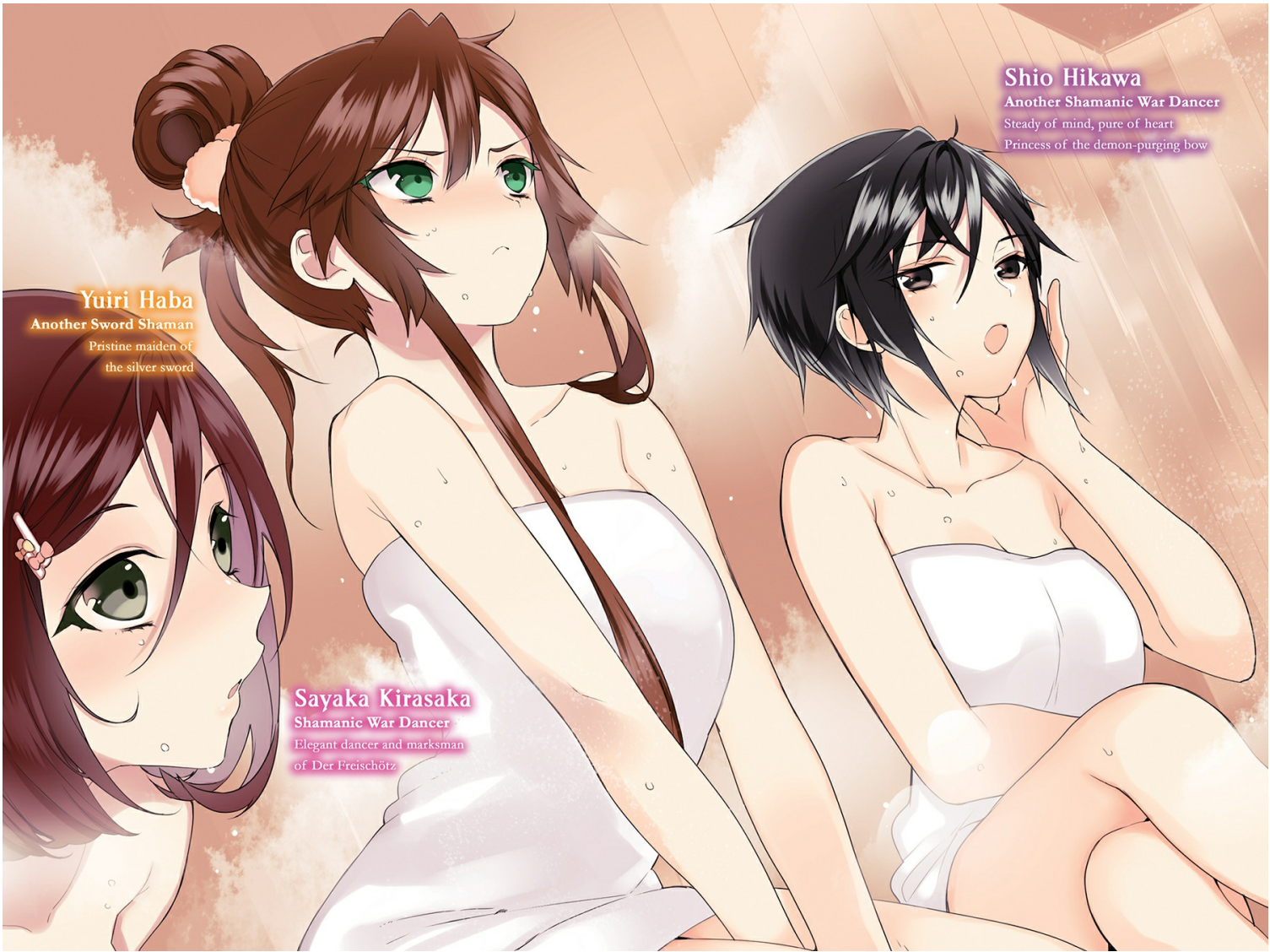
Cyber Empress

Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius

Motoki Yaze

Hyper Adapter

Cheerful classmate
or two-faced jester?



Yuiri Haba

Another Sword Shaman

Pristine maiden of
the silver sword

Sayaka Kirasaka

Shamanic War Dancer

Elegant dancer and marksman
of Der Freischütz

Shio Hikawa

Another Shamanic War Dancer

Steady of mind, pure of heart
Princess of the demon-purging bow

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STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE ROSES OF TARTARUS

13

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 13

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque

Cover art by Manyako

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INTRO

The faint light preceding daybreak dyed the border between sky and sea white.

Gazing out the tinted window at the water's horizon beyond, Sayaka Kirasaka stretched her legs in the spacious bathtub. It was a little past five thirty AM, and she'd just woken up. The fairly hot bathwater was relaxing first thing in the morning.

"Mm, baths are so nice."

Murmuring to herself in satisfaction, Sayaka lazily leaned against the edge of the bathtub.

Slight vibrations from the diesel engine tickled her cheeks. She was aboard a large freight and passenger ship, which had departed from Tokyo and was headed to Itogami Island. As a passenger, Sayaka had been enjoying her fill of the ship's pride and joy, its panoramic-view bath.

"Sailing once in a while is nice. I had the best sleep I've had in a while, and the scenery's pretty good, too."

Sayaka absentmindedly mumbled to herself as she toyed with the clear bathwater in the palm of her hand.

It was roughly an eleven-hour trip from Tokyo to Itogami Island—a man-made isle floating atop the ocean about 300 kilometers south.

Unable to secure an aircraft reservation, she had been forced to travel by ship, but the trip had been more pleasant than she had anticipated. Gazing at the sunrise while immersed in a wide tub was an experience one would never be able to enjoy from the cramped confines of a business hotel's bath. Still...

"This would be heaven if I wasn't on my way to work..."

As she let that grumble slip, Sayaka lowered herself into the bathtub. *They sure wear people to the bone*, she thought. Released from house arrest only to be pulled off active duty again, she hadn't even had time to return to the Lion King Agency's headquarters before receiving a new assignment.

The saving grace was that her destination was the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island, where Sayaka's most dear friend, Yukina Himeragi, lived. If the ship arrived on schedule, Sayaka might well secure just enough time to talk to her before beginning the mission.

I wonder if she'll be surprised to see me out of the blue like this. Sayaka pictured the scene in her mind, reuniting with her former classmate, the girl she'd grown up with and who was practically a sister to her.

However, what promptly floated into the forefront of Sayaka's mind was the sight of a certain teenage boy with a perpetual lackadaisical expression. This was Yukina's observation target, the World's Mightiest Vampire, the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki.

"Wha...?! I-I'm not...! Th-that man can go to hell for all I care...!"

Sayaka groaned, her face ferociously reddening as she clutched her head and writhed within the bathtub. Viewed objectively, she would have looked like a very dangerous human being. Luckily, there were few guests in the large tub so early in the morning.

That was fortunate for another soul as well; Sayaka was not the only one making strange noises in the bath.

"Uuu! Nooo—!!"

The voice came from right behind Sayaka. She heard a high-pitched yelp from the direction of the washing area. The owner of the voice was a little girl supposedly around twelve or thirteen years old. Her long hair, which had a mysterious, silver luster, was covered in lathered shampoo. Somehow, she'd gotten shampoo in her eyes while washing her hair and had fallen into a panic.

"Ah, Glenda...?! Wait! If you don't properly wash out the shampoo...!"

Clutching the showerhead as she tried to call the young girl to a halt was another young woman with the vibe of an honors student. They didn't seem to be sisters, but she was far too young to be the little girl's mother. She was probably the same age as Sayaka. She felt familiar somehow...

However, before Sayaka could recall just who the girl was, her eyes widened as she froze, gawking. Eyes closed, still covered in bubbles, the steel-haired girl

was blindly charging Sayaka's way.

"Yaaa—!!"

"G-Glenda, don't! Stoop...!"

"Huh...?! What...?! Ah?!"

The girl with the vaguely familiar face desperately tried to stop the girl covered in soap suds.

The sudden emergency circumstance brought Sayaka to her feet in confusion. There would inevitably be a rough collision in the bath; worst case, someone could be seriously hurt. *I have to do something*, thought the flustered Sayaka, but her relaxed body did not respond as she imagined.

In the end, all Sayaka could do was extend one leg out of the bath as she tried to put a stop to the charging girl...before suffering a head-on collision.

"Goffhn!"

The ferocious impact knocked the wind out of Sayaka as the two tumbled into the bathtub.

She tried to catch her breath, but the majestic splash left water spray pouring down onto her face. She coughed and wheezed.

For her part, the girl named Glenda went "*Puhaa!*" as she poked her head out from the water, a look of relief coming over her. Tumbling into the bath had rinsed off all her shampoo.

"I-I'm very sorry! Are you all right...?! Are you hurt?!"

The girl acting as Glenda's guardian sounded hard-pressed as she called to Sayaka. Sayaka pushed up her thoroughly drenched bangs as she glared with half-lidded eyes at the new girl.

"Hey, there's no way anyone would be all right after... Huh? You're..."

"Miss...Sayaka?"

Gazing at Sayaka with a frightened look was Yuri Haba—from the same year and a fellow Attack Mage of the Lion King Agency. Naked except for the bath towel wrapped around her, she halted, dumbfounded.

“Yui! What happened?! Is Glenda all...?!”

Yui's expression was frozen stiff as a girl with a spirited look and a bob chased after her.

Noticing Glenda beginning to swim in the bath, a questioning look came over her face; next, she shifted her gaze to Yui, who hadn't moved.

“Sh-Shio? Th-this is, ah...”

For some reason, Yui was flustered, her arms waving up and down as she turned her back toward them. Yui's blatantly suspicious gestures made the girl named Shio narrow her eyes in suspicion until— “Geh?!”

“Ah—?!”

Heedless of annoying others, she and Sayaka simultaneously pointed at each other as they yelped.

Yui clutched her head as Shio and Sayaka behaved just as she had anticipated.

The short-haired girl—Shio Hikawa—was also once Sayaka's classmate. They were both Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency. However, that did not mean they got along well; indeed, it would be more accurate to consider them mortal enemies. As mutual Shamanic War Dancer candidates, the pair had competed fiercely in every category, butting heads over anything and everything.

“What is Kirasaka doing here?!”

“I could ask the same thing about you!”

Still nude, Sayaka and Shio butted heads—both literally and figuratively—as they glared at each other. Though it was a long-overdue reunion, there was not a single shred of tranquility. Raising her eyebrows in exasperation, Yui desperately tried to get a handle on the pair.

“...Dah?” Glenda, mystified, tilted her head as she watched the others.

Sayaka and Shio sat next to each other on a wooden bench.

The thermometer's needle indicated it was nearly ninety degrees. The pair was in the sauna room at a corner of the large bath chamber.

Just as Sayaka had been getting comfortable, she'd run across Shio, who happened to be inside. The atmosphere seemed such that the first one to leave lost the unspoken challenge.

Both were already drenched with sweat. The impetuous smiles they were trying to make somehow rang hollow.

"Just how long do you intend to stay in here, Shio Hikawa?"

"Shouldn't you be the one leaving in a hurry? I'm not looking after you if you keel over, you know?"

"Who's keeling over...?! Don't lump me together with you!"

"I'm sticking around for another hour."

"W-well, I can do two hours, no problem...!"

"In that case, I'll stay for two hours and five minutes!"

"Then I'll stay for two hours and six minutes!"

"Liar!"

"Well, you started it!"

Sayaka and Shio bared their teeth at each other, arguing like kids in elementary school. It was a scene that had played out time and time again back when they were at High God Forest.

"Come to think of it, hasn't this ship reached the island yet?"

When even Sayaka grew tired of the fruitless quarrel, she abruptly changed the subject. If the ship was soon to arrive, she thought it would serve as an excuse to leave the sauna.

"Earlier, they announced that the arrival would be delayed due to fog," Shio answered bluntly.

Sayaka let out a short groan and then said, with a twitch of her lips, "I—I see... That's...great..."

"I suppose so. Now we can stay in the sauna for as long as we like..."

Shio's cheeks stiffened as she bluffed. She, too, was clearly at her limit.

An oppressive silence descended over the sauna room. The heated atmosphere hurt one's throat, making it too rough to even let out a sigh by accident.

"You're quite fond of her, aren't you?" Sayaka murmured. Of course, she was asking about the girl named Glenda.

"I guess I am." Shio nodded with a serious look.

Naturally, Sayaka knew that Glenda was no mere civilian. The fact that two Attack Mages were accompanying her, rookies as they might be, was proof enough of that.

"Who is she?"

"We're in the middle of escorting her to Itogami Island to have that looked into. I mean, if you want the best organizations to research something related to sorcery or demon beasts, you can't beat a Demon Sanctuary, right?"

Sayaka greeted Shio's flatly intoned words with a low-energy "hmmm." In other words, even Shio and Yuiri didn't yet know who or what Glenda really was.

"So you two are her bodyguards?"

"It's possible that remnants of the Cleansers are after her, so yeah, I guess we must be," Shio replied, annoyed that Sayaka was possibly making fun of her. "Besides, the only ones Glenda's fond of are Yuiri and the Fourth Primogenitor..."

"What...?!"

Shio's nonchalant comment clearly unnerved Sayaka.

"The Fourth Primogenitor... Why is Kojou Akatsuki's name popping up here?!"

"Because it was the Fourth Primogenitor who saved Glenda in the Kannawa Lake incident. Er... Or was it actually Glenda who saved the Fourth Primogenitor...?"

"B-behind my back like that... What does that man think he's doing...?!"

Without realizing it, Sayaka was tugging at her long, towel-wrapped hair. Shio

looked back at her with suspicion.

“Isn’t Yukina Himeragi the Fourth Primogenitor’s observer...? Why would you be concerned about what he’s up to?” she asked.

“Th-that’s... In other words, it means he’s been exposing *my* Yukina to danger!”

“Ah... I see.”

Shio readily trusted Sayaka’s words, despite Sayaka saying them partially for her own benefit. Shio was well aware that Sayaka doted on her younger ex-roommate.

“Come to think of it, what are you going to Itogami Island for, Kirasaka?”

“Work and more work. Espionage on MAR.”

Sayaka’s shoulders sank as she replied immediately. Even if she got along poorly with the girl, they were fellow Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency, so she judged there was no problem with divulging the details of her mission.

“MAR? That international sorcerous industrial conglomerate?”

“Yes. Magna Ataraxia Research Incorporated. There are signs they shipped some kind of weird cargo to the MAR lab on Itogami Island, so I’m checking out what’s inside.”

“Espionage... Is that something you can pull off, Kirasaka?”

“What do you mean by that?!”

When Shio replied with a frank look, Sayaka glared at her, voice going ragged.

Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency were experts in curses and assassinations. In the modern era, assassinations were rarely carried out, but the Shamanic War Dancers’ skills were employed in crucial missions such as protecting important people and operating as spies.

However, Shio shifted an earnestly concerned gaze at Sayaka as she said, “I mean, you’re pretty...eye-catching, right?”

“Well, excuse me for being big!”

Sayaka snarled with a spasm of her temple. Sayaka secretly had a complex about her tall, fashion-model physique. However, it was the swell of the breasts Sayaka hid beneath her bath towel that Shio was staring at.

“I’m not putting you down. I’m a little jealous myself.”

“It’s not like you’re small,” a sour Sayaka murmured, still unaware of the target of Shio’s gaze. Shio was around 160 centimeters tall. Sayaka didn’t think she was small enough to warrant jealousy.

“Are you *trying* to get under my skin?” Shio’s voice was as piercing as a barb. Her gaze fell to her own cleavage. Her body type was at an overwhelming disadvantage compared to the glamorous curvature of Sayaka’s.

“Excuse me? What the...? Are you trying to pick a fight with me...?”

Sayaka welcomed Shio’s antagonistic gaze head-on. Still covered in sweat, the two glared at each other once more.

The next moment, the door to the sauna room opened, and Yui leaped through. She’d apparently been eavesdropping outside the door, worried about leaving Sayaka and Shio alone by themselves.

“Stop, Shio! Sayaka, too... You mustn’t!”

“Dah! No fight!”

Glenda, clutching onto Yui as she entered the room, stared at Sayaka and Shio with sparkling eyes. With that look trained upon them, even Sayaka and Shio could not manage to continue quarreling like little children.

“And by espionage, I don’t mean sneaking into the lab, so I’ll be fine. I have the cooperation of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, and I have a connection at MAR’s Itogami Island lab, too.”

Sayaka grudgingly returned to her explanation.

Shio looked curious. “Connection?”

“Kojou Akatsuki’s mother is MAR’s chief researcher at the Itogami Island lab.”

“Huh...?!” For once, Shio looked shocked. “Kojou Akatsuki’s mother... You mean Mr. Gajou’s wife? You know her, Kirasaka?!”

“Huh? Mr....Gajou?” This time, it was Sayaka’s turn to incline her head.

Judging from Shio’s way of speaking, this Gajou had to be Kojou Akatsuki’s father. However, she had no idea why Shio would have such an individual on her mind.

For her part, Yuri seemed to remember something as she said, “Shio...you really are...”

“I-I’m not! I’m really not! It’s not like that at all...!”

Shio desperately shook her head, her usual composure completely absent. Perhaps it didn’t stand out because they were in a sauna, but if anyone looked closely, Shio’s face was bright red to the tips of her ears.

I’ve gotta make them spill the details, thought Sayaka, eagerly licking her lips, when suddenly— A jolt struck the ship.

The roar was like falling thunder, combined with the very heavy vibration from being struck with a giant maul.

The ship’s hull creaked ferociously, and the floor steadily tilted.

“Wh-what was...that impact...?!”

“Did we run aground? Is that even possible out here...?”

Sayaka and Shio nodded to each other, dashing outside the sauna room. Their bodies were completely drenched in sweat, but there was no time to be concerned about that.

“Yuri! Ships! Lots!!”

“Y-yeah. That’s...true...”

Glenda was excitedly pointing out the window. Yuri nodded in response as she stood there, dumbfounded.

There, just after daybreak, a white mist hid the surface of the sea. The mist was dense and heavily reduced visibility. Amid that unnatural fog floated countless enormous shadows.

It was a horde of shipwrecked vessels. Freighters, fishing vessels, even coast guard patrol ships—an abundant number of ships adrift had collected in that

part of the sea.

Apparently, the passenger ship Sayaka and the others were aboard had collided with one of them.

“What is this...?!”

A ship graveyard—those were the only words that came to mind as Sayaka and the others gazed at the spectacle, unable to do a thing.

It was a moment later that the emergency siren rang, echoing within the vessel.



At the break of dawn, the girl’s eyes remained closed as she faced the sea.

She stood on the observation deck of a giant cruiser at a standstill in the ocean. The morning breeze, infused with a faint whiff of humidity, caused the girl’s hair to sway. In the rays trickling from the morning sun, the translucent golden hair seemed to change color according to the level of light, almost like a rainbow. It was reminiscent of billowing flames— “Sunrise... Detestable—yet beautiful nonetheless.”

A tall, slender, handsome young man appeared at the girl’s side. The white fangs poking out from his lips proclaimed his origins. He was an Old Guard vampire—an aristocrat from the Warlord’s Empire, a direct descendant of the Lost Warlord’s own bloodline.

“Have you come to comfort me in my time of tedium, King of Snakes?” the girl asked, not bothering to turn her head toward him.

A glass chess set was placed on the table before her. The pieces were arranged as if a match had been abandoned midway; the seat on the other side of the chessboard was empty. Her opponent was nowhere to be found.

“A chess study?”

“My opponent hath already departed. ’Twas unavoidable.”

The girl replied to the young man’s question. Her slender fingertips moved a pawn forward, converting it to a queen.

“I see. Tartarus Lapse—they intend to begin?”

The young man quietly looked over his shoulder. Behind them floated a giant, artificial city—the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island.

“Indeed. There yet remain some who would defy fate,” the girl replied in a singsong tone. Her expression was unreadable, but her voice sounded gloomy.

“Would you rather have gone as well?”

“—Dost thou desire to know why we seeketh to rend the body of the Twelfth asunder?” the girl asked in a cold and lonely voice. She moved the piece once more, placing her opponent in check.

“Ah,” went the young vampire, gazing up at the sky of dawn as he exhaled. “Quite a pity.”

A ferocious smile came over him as he laughed. Then, to no one in particular, the young man murmured once more, “A pity. I really had taken a liking to that boy...”

CHAPTER ONE
THE BLOCKADE

CHAPTER ONE

THE BLOCKADE

1

Kojou Akatsuki awoke at the sound of his alarm ringing for the third time.

His back smoldered from the sunrays passing through the curtain. Even though it was early morning, it was humid enough to make him sweat. The air was so thick you'd think it was midsummer. It was the Itogami Island air he knew very well.

"Morning, huh...? Shit... Doesn't even feel like I got any rest..."

With his vision still somewhat hazy, Kojou groped for the alarm clock and silenced it.

His entire body felt as heavy as lead, like he'd run a full marathon the preceding day. It was no doubt the product of built-up fatigue. After all, immediately following New Year's, he'd traveled all the way to the mainland; he'd only just returned to Itogami Island.

Between those two events, for some reason, he had Natsuki Minamiya, one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, and the terrorist Cleansers after his hide; he'd repeatedly come face-to-face with death. Somehow, he'd escaped in one piece, but the accumulated mental exhaustion and the knowledge that winter break was about to end had maxed out his fatigue gauge. Kojou desperately fought the craving to crawl back into bed, stripping off his T-shirt as he headed out of the room.

The smell of freshly poured coffee wafted about the living room.

The morning news was quietly coursing through the mounted television. Nagisa was watching it with what seemed to be a mystified look.

She must have been in the middle of changing clothes, because she was only in her underwear, stroking the uniform neatly folded on her lap.

“Nagisa...?”

Kojou unwittingly called out to his little sister, her unusual silence making him feel like something was amiss.

Today, her hair, usually tied up, was unbound. Maybe that was why she looked so different. The backlight passing through her hair seemed to give it a faint, golden glimmer.

“Ah, Kojou. Good morning—”

Finally noticing him, a gentle smile came over Nagisa as she looked back.

“Heya,” Kojou said, nodding vaguely as his bewilderment deepened. After all, the little sister Kojou knew wasn’t the type to make a fleeting smile like that. One might call her personality naive, meddlesome, very amiable, and boisterous; normally, she’d have ripped the blanket off Kojou and driven him out of bed before the alarm clock even rang.

“Something wrong with the uniform?”

Kojou kept his bewilderment off his face as he carefully posed the question. He wondered if maybe she’d messed something up and was down in the dumps.

“No... It’s nothing.” Nagisa narrowed her eyes.

Kojou’s breath came to a halt as he was stricken by déjà vu. He superimposed another person’s face over the image of his little sister treasuring the middle school uniform—the face of someone who no longer existed.

“I just felt...happy. Starting today, I can go see everyone at school again...”

“Hmm...”

Kojou maintained his composure as he murmured curtly.

Then Nagisa blinked, seemingly snapping back to her own senses. She had an exasperated look as she glared at Kojou, still wandering around topless.

“For that matter, Kojou, put something on. It’s criminal to wander around naked in front of a maiden—criminal!”

“Hey, I’m wearing my underwear just fine. I couldn’t find my uniform shirt.”

“Your shirt’s on top of the chair at the dinner table. I ironed it and left it there.”

“Is that so? My bad.”

“You really make me work, sheesh. So get dressed already, quick!”

“You should probably get dressed, too.” Kojou, relieved that Nagisa was finally back to her normal state, lobbed a rebuttal.

“Huh...?” Nagisa sounded confused and looked down to inspect herself.

Nagisa, holding her uniform top and bottom in her hands, was wearing nothing but simple white underwear. Finally noticing as much, Nagisa let out a barely audible shriek as she curled up.



“D-did you see anything...?”

“Huh... Guess we’re out of milk.”

“No reaction?!”

After retrieving his uniform shirt, Kojou opened the fridge door and checked the contents within. It was plain as day that he’d placed a higher priority on assuaging hunger and thirst over the sight of his little sister in forgettable undies.

“Mnnn... I used the milk to make scrambled eggs earlier!”

“Oh? I’d better buy some on the way back.”

When his sullen little sister gave an honest reply, Kojou made his dejection clear. Buying meat and vegetables on the way back from school was chiefly Kojou’s duty.

“Ah... Come to think of it, there was some freighter accident, wasn’t there?”

“Yep. There’s been a lot of that lately. It’s really inconvenient being on a man-made island at times like these. Meat, dairy, and fish run out fast, and it’s more expensive buying them here than on the mainland...”

“Well, it’s not typhoon season, so the next ship’ll come soon enough,” Kojou replied, unmoved.

For Itogami Island, floating smack dab in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, slow or missed shipments were a common occurrence. It wasn’t rare for prolonged rough weather to halt imports for close to a week at a time.

“That’s true, but...”

“I’m giving the store a check with Himeragi on the way back, so if you need anything else, just tell her, okay?”

The only thing left in the fridge was dark-green vegetable juice, which didn’t exactly agree with Kojou. Nagisa stared in silence as Kojou grimaced, took out a pack, and poured the contents down his throat.

“You’re with...Yukina today?”

Nagisa’s halting murmur sounded almost like she was talking to herself.

“Huh?” went Kojou, wiping his lips as he looked back. Distracted by the taste of the vegetable juice, he simply hadn’t heard her very well.

However, Nagisa seemed just as surprised as he was, making an exaggerated shake of her head as she said, “Ah, mmm, of—of course you are.”

“Yeah,” said Kojou, nodding without really understanding the point.

Thanks to not having woken up to his first alarm, he didn’t have much time to spare.

He kicked the troublesome conversation down the road, gratefully accepting the breakfast his little sister had made for him.

“What was that...?”

Nagisa was hurriedly dressing herself as she watched Kojou bite into his bread. She let out a worried sigh.

“What was...with me just now...?”

Kojou hadn’t noticed his little sister mumble as she pressed a hand to her chest, trying to pin down the misty feeling within.

2

Visiting the classroom for the first time in a while, Kojou thought the place came off as particularly quiet. Even though classes were about to start, a good 30 percent of the students had yet to arrive at school. Perhaps they were vacation drunk and had overslept. *Should’ve taken my sweet time and slept a little more*, thought Kojou with some degree of envy as he arrived at his own seat.

“Good morning, Kojou. It’s been a...well, no, it hasn’t.”

The morose voice came from Asagi Aiba, who sat nearby.

Her extravagant hairstyle and edgy variations on the school uniform, barely shy of breaking school regulations, were the same as always. But just like Kojou, there somehow seemed an exhausted air hovering over her at the moment. Small wonder—she’d been involved in the demon-beast incident on the

mainland, having just returned to Itogami Island herself.

“Mornin’. Feels like it’s been ages since I’ve seen you in a school uniform.”

“Don’t make me remember something I don’t need to. Just forget about it!”

Asagi bared her teeth as she glared at Kojou. Her cheeks were faintly reddened. The pilot suit resembling a school swimsuit complete with her name written on it that she’d been forced to wear had apparently inflicted a fair amount of trauma.

“Good morning, Asagi. Akatsuki, too.”

From behind Asagi, a tall, mature-looking female student addressed them. This was Rin Tsukishima, the class representative. Just as one might expect, she maintained the constant, valiant impression she usually had, even amid so many students wearing long faces over the end of the holidays.

“Ah, Rin... Good morning.”

“Tsukishima...”

“The two of you seem rather...worn out.”

Rin’s eyebrows rose with suspicion as she watched Kojou and Asagi reply with leaden voices.

Asagi smiled listlessly and shook her head.

“Does it look that way to you?”

“Well, I just got back from the mainland... So that’s probably why.”

“Eh? You went to the mainland, too, Kojou?”

Rin’s eyes blinked in surprise. An inquisitive glint rose in her pupils as she gave Kojou an admiring stare.

“Asagi was on the mainland until the day before yesterday, yes? Could it be, the two of you were...? My, oh my...”

“‘My, oh my,’ nothing! It’s coincidence, pure coincidence!” Asagi refuted with ferocious energy.

Kojou’s shoulders sank with a sigh as he added, “I just picked up my little

sister from Granny's."

"I was shopping in the capital. I had Tanker with me. You know her, right? Lydianne Didier. Had nothing to do with Kojou whatsoever."

"Hmmm, really? Well, I shall leave it at that."

Rin's lips twisted into a sneer. She had the expression of a world-wise mother ignoring her daughter's excuses.

Asagi rested her cheek on a hand, pouting as she said, "Leave it at that or not, it's the truth."

"But you met Asagi over there, didn't you?"

"Er, I wouldn't really call it 'meeting' her—"

When Rin's gaze abruptly shifted his way, Kojou replied without thinking.

"You idiot...!"

Why did you have to go and say that? thought Asagi as she covered her eyes, face raised toward the heavens. Rin let out a giggly laugh.

The next moment, a male student with headphones around his neck entered the classroom, looking distinctly short on sleep—Motoki Yaze.

"Mornin'... What are you two arguing about at this hour?"

"Nothing at all."

Perhaps thinking herself unable to endure any further ridicule, Asagi made a shooing motion, as if telling Yaze to get lost.

Yaze showed not the slightest care about her childish gesture. "Hmm... Well, fine. Here's a souvenir from Tokyo. Eat up."

Speaking those words, he placed a paper bag of chocolates, apparently bought from an airport vendor, in front of Kojou and the others.

"You went to the mainland, too?"

Asagi immediately ripped the bag open, plucking out one of the chocolates inside.

They'd been out of touch with Yaze since the aftermath of the New Year's

temple visit. It was the first either Kojou or Asagi had heard of him having left the island, too.

“Well, there were some circumstances involved in that... Anyway, I’m tired...” Slumping over his desk, Yaze murmured in a frail voice.

“Well, whatever. Good you both came back safe and sound, right?” Rin consoled, looking them over.

“Whaddaya mean?” Kojou raised his eyebrows at her words, oddly rich with implication. “Come to think of it, there’s a lot of people late, aren’t there?”

“Kojou, didn’t you see the news this morning?” Rin asked, surprised.

Kojou bluntly replied with a shake of his head, “Nope.”

Nagisa not having put the TV on at normal volume like usual tugged at his mind a little, but Kojou had been too sleepy that morning to check the news himself.

“Not a single ship scheduled to arrive at Itogami Island has arrived since yesterday. The reasons seem highly varied, from accidents to running aground, even food poisoning onboard.”

“Seriously...?”

Yaze’s dramatic explanation struck Kojou dumbfounded. Nagisa had mentioned incidents involving ships, but naturally, he’d never imagined it was on such a large scale. It was extremely improbable that a string of that many incidents could occur by mere coincidence.

“Come to mention it, maybe that’s why a parcel I bought by mail order hasn’t arrived?” Asagi pondered, worried.

“Quite likely. It would seem there have been flights canceled as well. What did you buy?” Rin asked.

Asagi clutched her head with such drama that one would think the world was coming to an end.

“Brand-new sweets from a pudding specialty shop and quantum nano memory expansion for PC... Ugh, the expiration date... The state-of-the-art parts...”

“What is that mystifying pairing...? Well, just like Asagi, I suppose...”

I shouldn't have worried, Rin's sigh seemed to say.

“The missing flights since yesterday seem to be due to turbulence,” Yaze noted, talking as if the situation wasn't his problem.

“Ah,” Kojou said in understanding, “so there's a whole bunch of people who haven't made it back to Itogami Island...”

“And Itogami Island has three or four flights landing every day. An artificial island is inconvenient at times like these,” Asagi said, still crestfallen.

In other words, the quiet classroom was thanks to the missed arrivals by both sea and air.

“Would've been a little easier for me if flights got canceled just a little sooner...”

Yaze mumbled to himself with a distant look in his eyes. Kojou wasn't sure what had happened, but apparently, Yaze's time on the mainland had been less than pleasant. He kept murmuring complaints under his breath, something about “MAR... Smuggling...”

Suddenly, he lifted his head up with great force, almost like he'd been struck by an electric jolt.

“Yaze? What is it?”

“Oh, nah. It's nothin'.”

Yaze looked up at Kojou's suspicious face and smiled casually like he always did, but his cheeks remained stiff.

“It's nothing... Right...?”

The forlorn murmur sounded like Yaze was trying to convince himself of something.

It was soon after that the chime for classes began to ring.

Being an artificial isle, Itogami Island's degree of ground stability meant the construction of skyscrapers was impossible. In exchange, the city center was packed with blocks of medium-sized office buildings.

From this swarm of buildings, it was the roof of a particularly plain one among them upon which a single girl was lying, as if asleep.

She was a little girl not even a hundred and fifty centimeters in height. She looked to be in her mid-teens. Because she was wearing a white shirt and a suspender skirt, she looked very much like an elementary schooler attending a noted academy.

Her face, too, seemed young and frail. Her big almond eyes were adorable, but her general appearance did not stand out. It did not, save one thing—the large, beast-like ears springing from her head.

“December, do you read me?”

The little girl spoke to a smartphone lying next to her.

“This is December. You’re coming in loud and clear, Carly.”

The reply from the smartphone was immediate. The person on the other end had a serene tone largely devoid of tension.

The voice brought an expression of visible relief over the girl.

“Carly in position. Field of view all clear.”

“Copy. Vehicle boarded by target moving along Island West Fourteenth Avenue toward Keystone Gate. Will arrive at predicted location within three hundred seconds.”

“I have confirmed by visual. Preparing to snipe the target.”

The beast-eared girl calling herself Carly roused herself and opened a case placed at her fingertips. It was a black case for carrying a cello. However, its contents were not a musical instrument, but rather a large military rifle. It was a bullpup-style anti-materiel sniper rifle.

“Yes, yes. Sending the data now.”

“Confirmed.”

The smartphone's screen displayed various data as measured by December: wind direction, wind speed, humidity, air temperature, air density, and the target's attire.

"I'll leave the rest to you. Fire at will, Carly."

"Copy. Thank you, December."

"You are very welcome."

Carly listened to December's cheerful voice as she adopted a prone firing position. Through her scope, Carly was only able to see a tiny crack between a tangle of office buildings. But for her, this was plenty.

The scenery gleaned through the scope was the entrance to a high-class hotel.

Carly's superhuman senses allowed her to accurately detect moving cars at a range of nine hundred meters. The screeching of brakes. The footsteps of the doorman. The black-painted, high-class sedan parked in front of the hotel. The opening of the door, the first bodyguard getting out of the front passenger's seat. Next, the second bodyguard riding in one of the back seats getting out. Then, flanked by those two, a small, old man exited the vehicle. Her chance to snipe would only be good for a few meters between there and the building.

Relying on the senses in which her body was immersed, she made minor adjustments for the wind and the state of the atmosphere. Carly quietly pulled the trigger. Gas spewed out from the muzzle break, assaulting her with the dull recoil peculiar to a .50 caliber round. Even so, Carly calmly tracked the arc of the bullet she had fired.

Her acuity to movement, particular to beast people, allowed her to watch the bullet until the moment it sent her target's skull flying.

It had all happened in an instant. Killing intent encased in a full-metal jacket had been sent flying from nine hundred meters away. The target probably hadn't known what had happened to him until the very end.

"Hit confirmed. Pulling out," she reported, setting the rifle in her cello case, her duty finished.

“That’s my Carly.”

She heard the gentle voice of December over the smartphone from the other end. Even as the words instilled feelings of pride, Carly shook her head a little.

“No. Thank you, December.”

4

It was a corner of the student cafeteria. On a sunny terrace, Yukina Himeragi was divvying up the hamburg steak of her lunch set. She was with her classmates: Minami Shindou, Sakura Koushima, and Nagisa Akatsuki.

Even among the students, the cafeteria of Saikai Academy was held in high regard, and it was particularly packed during lunch hour. Out of consideration for their high school seniors, the students in middle school did not normally eat the school’s food.

However, that day only, the empty seats on the popular terrace stood out, and even Yukina and the others were able to make use of them without the concern of inconveniencing others. The unfilled seats were doubtlessly follow-up effects of the ship incidents and the canceled flights.

Yukina’s class had six students absent all by itself, and with the teacher absent, half the lesson was self-study. Yet, the matter that had bewildered Yukina and the others since morning was a separate issue altogether.

That issue was Nagisa Akatsuki.

“Hey, Yukina. What happened to you two on winter break...?”

Minami Shindou, aka Cindy, twirled the pasta on her plate around with a fork as she posed the question. She sounded as if she was thoroughly at a loss.

“What...do you mean?”

Yukina stopped handling her food as she echoed the question back. She didn’t require an explanation to vaguely understand what Cindy was trying to say to begin with.

“You know. That.”

“Nagisa?”

As expected, Cindy’s eyes indicated the side of Nagisa’s face as she sat close to the cafeteria window. Cream croquettes were supposedly one of her favorites, but Nagisa left them untouched as she stared absentmindedly at the schoolyard.

“This, um, isn’t like her, right? It doesn’t seem like her health’s in bad shape, either...”

“I suppose not,” Yukina gravely concurred.

The normal Nagisa was a chatterbox, speaking three times as much as a normal person. That liveliness was part of Nagisa’s charm, so for her to remain quiet that long was eerie to no small measure. It was enough to make Yukina think it was some kind of ill omen.

Staring at Yukina, Sakura casually asked, “Did she go to the mainland during the winter break?”

“Yeah. Nagisa was visiting her grandmother.”

“Just Nagisa...? I see... Then, where were you and Akatsuki, Yukina?”

“We were—”

When Sakura questioned her like it was some kind of interview, Yukina unintentionally let the truth slip out. With an “Oho,” Cindy leaned forward with deep interest.

“Um, on the mainland, Nagisa’s father and grandmother were injured, so senpai and I wound up going together to pick up Nagisa—”

Yukina carefully explained it away, as if trying to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. Though the sequence of events was...rearranged somewhat, she was mostly honest nonetheless.

“Ah, was that it? That so? Quite a thing to go through just after New Year’s,” Cindy said out of concern. She was the type of person who was surprisingly considerate. “Maybe Nagisa’s in the dumps about that?”

“Mmm. I don’t think so...”

Yukina shook her head a little. After all, Hisano Akatsuki ought to have left the hospital by then, and Gajou Akatsuki was in high spirits, unthinkable for a gravely injured patient; indeed, claims of sexual harassment from nurses had apparently come from the hospital only the night before. She didn't think it was anything worth Nagisa worrying about to the extent of being morose.

“Speak of the devil...”

Sakura abruptly pointed something out. She was staring at the student cafeteria's vending machine corner. That very moment, Kojou Akatsuki and Asagi Aiba were lined up side by side as they made their purchases.

Cindy spoke with just a slight bit of envy in her voice. “Ah, Akatsuki. And he's with Asagi Aiba...getting along nicely, same as usual. Well, they do suit each other...”

Flattery could not describe the sight of the two arguing over which carbonated drink flavor was tastier—grape or orange—as even remotely romantic, but viewed from a distance, their relationship did seem rather intimate nonetheless.

Yukina strongly pursed her lips as the scene stirred a faint throbbing in her chest.

Right beside Yukina, an ominous *snap* rang out.

“...Snap?”

The destructive sound of something being broken caused Cindy to turn back and look at Yukina.

No, no, Yukina's nervous shake of her head said. True, Yukina found the scene unamusing for reasons Cindy did not know, but she hadn't done anything. The individual who had broken the chopsticks in her hand with an emotionless face was someone far less expected.

Nagisa, gazing outside absentmindedly up to that point, was biting her lip as she stared at Kojou and Asagi.

Tears were streaming out of her wide-open eyes.

“Nagisa...?!”

“N-Nagisa? What’s wrong?”

Yukina and the others were shaken. However much she’d seemed off that morning, they’d never expected Nagisa to break into tears over such a thing.

The fact that they didn’t know the cause bewildered Yukina and the others all the more.

Nagisa and Kojou were siblings that got along comparatively well. But none thought Nagisa would be jealous of Asagi because of it. She was very fond of Asagi, adoring her like a big sister.

“Eh? Huh...? What am I doing...?”

Nagisa stared at her fallen tears, speaking as if they surprised even her. Apparently, Nagisa herself didn’t understand why she was crying.

“Are you all right?” Sakura asked, taking out a handkerchief.

Borrowing it to wipe her drenched cheeks away, Nagisa giggled a “Tee-hee” and weakly smiled. “Yeah, of course. Sorry. I’m gonna head back early.”

Carrying the tray with her largely untouched meal, Nagisa walked toward the student cafeteria’s exit.

Cindy seemed about to go after her in a hurry but apparently reconsidered the action partway, sitting back down. She’d no doubt judged it was better to leave Nagisa alone for the time being.

“Is she really all right...?”

Even so, Cindy murmured in apparent concern. Sakura gazed at the vending machine area, where Kojou and Asagi had been all that time.

“Jealousy?” Sakura asked.

“It can’t be.” Cindy spread both arms wide. “Why start now?”

“You have a point,” agreed Sakura with a nod. Kojou and Asagi hadn’t exactly just started being together. It was so taken for granted, you could joke that they knew each other a little too well.

Why, then, would Nagisa be shocked by it...? As the two inclined their heads, a grave expression came over Yukina alone.

“Just now... It couldn’t be...”

She unwittingly murmured to herself as she rose to her feet. As she did, Yukina felt a strong backward yank. When she suddenly looked back, Cindy and Sakura were both grasping the cuffs of her uniform.

“Hey, you. You’re the last person she needs chasing after her.” Cindy winked at her.

Yukina blinked. “Eh?”

“If it really is jealousy, you talking to her will make things worse,” Sakura explained.

“It... It’s not like that. I...”

I have an idea why Nagisa’s been acting strangely, Yukina wanted to say, but she swallowed the words. The secret of just what was hidden within her flesh and blood was not something to blithely divulge to others.

“We’ll do the follow-up. Leave this to us.”

“So for the time being, return these, please?”

Cindy and Sakura entrusted their empty dinner trays to Yukina as they headed out of the cafeteria.

Yukina sighed deeply, watching their backs as the pair departed.

Within Nagisa Akatsuki slept Aurora, the twelfth Kaleid Blood—the soul of what was once the Fourth Primogenitor. The incident a few days prior at Kannawa Lake had proven that without a doubt. Nagisa herself likely remained unaware of that. But if Aurora’s soul was affecting its host, that would explain Nagisa’s current, unstable mental state.

It would also mean that Aurora’s soul had begun to bleed into Nagisa’s psyche. Yukina was fearful that the two girls were in a far more precarious state than she had expected.

What should I do? she wondered, but of course, there was no answer to be had.

She couldn’t discuss it with Kojou, but she also hesitated to report it to the

Lion King Agency. After all, it was their very own attempt to make use of Aurora that was the cause of Nagisa's erosion to begin with.

Half beside herself, Yukina rose up in wobbly fashion, cleaning up before leaving the student cafeteria when, without warning, a figure suddenly appeared, standing before her.

It was a small woman, wearing an extravagant dress like that of a Western-style doll.

"So this is where you were, transfer student?"

"Ms. Minamiya...?"

"Sorry, but I need to speak to you. Would you come with me for a moment?"

Without any small talk, Natsuki came right out with what she wanted. It was rare for her to be without her usual aura of composure, which threw Yukina for a loop.

"Speak with...me? But..."

Yukina looked worried, her words hesitant. In the first place, federal Attack Mages assigned to police duties were in the same field as the Lion King Agency, and relations between the rivals were poor. It was extraordinary for Natsuki, a federal Attack Mage, to come to Yukina for aid. The Sword Shaman had a very bad feeling about it.

However, Natsuki must have anticipated Yukina's evasive reaction, for she made a leering, mean-spirited smile as she said, "If you do not politely do as I say, I'll cry."

"C-cry?"

In front of a wide-eyed Yukina, Natsuki covered her eyes with both hands. "*Waaah*," she went, her voice rising unrestrained, deliberately making her shoulders quiver. Though it was crystal clear to Yukina that she was putting on a performance, a third party glancing over would not know the tears were fake. In fact, it would look exactly like Yukina was bullying Natsuki...

Yukina felt the palpable physical pressure of nearby gazes gathering upon her. Even setting that aside, Natsuki's presence stood out. A middle school transfer

student was making a female teacher who looked like a little girl cry—there was no way such a circumstance wouldn't gain attention.

“Um, er... I understand! I understand, so please...” Yukina acquiesced, unable to bear it any longer. In the worst case, more weird rumors spreading about her inside the school might hinder her mission of observing the Fourth Primogenitor.

“Let us be off, then?”

Natsuki, ending her false tears on a dime, looked up at the stiff Yukina and spoke with an emotionless look.

Yukina sighed, tempted to burst into tears herself as she warily followed suit.

5

December rode a white scooter through a narrow alley in the office building district.

With most of the vehicles on Itogami Island operating with electric motors, the old-style scooter running on a gasoline engine was virtually an antique. The obnoxiously loud pattering engine and white gas exhaust stood out as being in exceptionally bad taste.

December hummed a nursery rhyme in concert with the engine's vibrations.

She was a foreign girl with a baby face. She was wearing platform shoes, but even so, her height probably didn't amount to a hundred and sixty centimeters. Her outfit consisted of a letterman jacket and a denim miniskirt. With a half helmet on her head, she wore goggles like those of a swimmer's to keep the wind at bay.

December gradually slowed down the scooter, finally stopping at the parking lot of an old mixed-use office building.

It was a decrepit, ruined building awaiting demolition. The occupants had already finished moving out, leaving it empty and abandoned. However, December circled around to the back of the site, entering the building from the emergency stairs. She felt a faint trace of human presence in the supposedly

unoccupied building.

“I’m back, Logi.”

December called out as she reached the top of the narrow stairs.

An individual lying on the sofa responded to her voice. He was slender and wore a coat with seemingly countless snaps; he was an androgynous-looking, handsome teenage boy. His face had an artificial, perfect symmetry about it, and his hair was indigo, a color that did not exist in nature. These visual characteristics revealed his true nature.

He was an artificial life-form born from alchemy and science—a homunculus.

“Did you blow through all of the shopping money, December...?”

The boy named Logi spoke, discarding the magazine he had been reading. He was staring at the shopping bag December was carrying with an exasperated expression.

“Making us worry by coming back so late... You might upset Teacher if you keep wasting money like that, you know?”

“But I really wanted the season-limited New Year’s Nekoma...”

As December spoke, she dangled a mascot doll attached to a key holder. Apparently, she’d bought up every treat in the convenience store just to obtain the doll she was showing off.

“I know, Logi. I’ll give the other ones I picked up to you.”

“Don’t need any.”

Logi spoke coldly in response to the large mass of mascots December presented to him. “More importantly, what about Carly?”

“She’s eliminated targets one and two. We’ll rendezvous at the safe house next.”

“Hmm... So she pulled off the hit?”

“That’s my Carly for you. Just as I predicted.”

Watching Logi let out a murmur of relief, December smiled with pride. Logi responded to her carefree tone with an exasperated shake of his head.

“We’re at the point they’ll finally tighten their guard. Their censorship has to be at its limits, too.”

“I suppose so.”

December nodded.

Even with nearly half a day having passed since the first snipe, no information about the incident had leaked. The Gigafloat Management Corporation had likely twisted some arms to prevent the information from spreading—but two Itogami City VIPs had been assassinated in broad daylight. That wasn’t something that could be kept secret forever.

“The big one’s next. You’ll be all right?”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?”

When December asked out of visible concern, Logi glared at her with a dissatisfied curl of his lips. Without fanfare, he spread his palm, whereupon the blue shimmer within swayed.

December smiled cheerfully, giving Logi’s hair a good stroking.

“Of course I trust you, Logi. Love ya.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Logi gloomily squirmed away, but he made no particular effort to brush December’s hand away.

Perhaps the ruckus from December’s and Logi’s voices had been heard, because the back room door opened, and a new individual emerged.

Though she had rather good looks, she had an emotionless face and a foul look in her eyes.

She had a long muffler wrapped around her neck and was wearing a thick, baggy coat. “Welcome back, December.”

The girl spoke with an inflectionless voice as she ate ice cream from a cup. December stared at the girl in surprise as she said: “Raan! That’s *my* ice cream!”

“I thought it would be a shame to let it melt, so I’m eating it.”

The girl named Raan replied with no malice evident in her words. December

fell to her knees as if she'd suffered a particularly devastating blow.

"Uu... My precious limited-edition seasonal flavor that I got from Lulu's..."

"It was delicious. But I prefer caramel." Raan tossed the empty ice cream cup into a cardboard box that was a substitute for a garbage bin.

December's cheeks puffed up as if she were a child while she turned an envious gaze Raan's way. However, Raan's expression did not change.

December, at her wits' end, sighed and said, "...Preparation for the Roses?"

"Finished. Now we wait."

"That so? Hard work, huh?" December said flatly.

With a tone of dismay, Raan asked, "You aren't praising me?"

"Ice cream grudges run deeper than the ocean."

"..."

When December gave her malicious reply, Raan looked back with a neutral expression.

Even though her face almost never changed, she somehow gave off the air of a lonely, abandoned puppy.

December must not have been able to stand the sight of Raan like that, because she quickly followed up with "I'm kidding, Raan. Love ya" and hugged the girl with great force.

"Can't...breathe."

As she was bear-hugged, Raan uttered the words, sounding unmoved. But December did not release her. Logi ignored the horseplay between the two girls for some time, but...

"December, it's time."

When he abruptly spoke those words, he rose to his feet in an instant, not making a sound.

When December checked the men's watch wrapped around her wrist, she clicked her tongue in regret and let Raan go.

“Can’t be helped. Then begin your end, Logi. Raan, rendezvous with Carly before moving.”

“And you, December?” Raan asked curtly.

December smiled and pointed at the homunculus boy as she said, “I’m Logi’s backup.”

“Don’t need any.” Logi’s reply came without a moment’s pause. He was behaving like a cheeky little brother rebelling against a meddlesome older sister.

However, December was undeterred. “I won’t interfere. I’ll just watch.”

“Then I really don’t need help.”

“Why not?!”

“Because you’ll just get in the way.”

“Logi, you meanie!”

December sulked, stomping on the ground like a little girl. Logi shook his head in exasperation.

“Do as you like.”

6

Kojou Akatsuki was sitting on the sofa in the student guidance office, facing opposite Natsuki Minamiya.

Visible right next to her was Yukina, dragged into the matter only slightly ahead of him.

Setting expensive-looking teacups on the table, Natsuki’s assistant and homunculus girl—Astarte—poured black tea, causing a high-class aroma to fill the air.

Natsuki calmly crossed her legs and opened her lace fan. As she did, Kojou glared intently at her and inquired in a low voice, “—So what’s up with these chains exactly...?”

Kojou's arms and legs were bound with golden chains, leaving his body in a largely immobile state. When Natsuki had appeared with Yukina in tow, she'd bound Kojou's entire body, hauling him to that room against his will.

"You're chained up because, even though I called your name in a gentle voice, you suddenly began to run away."

So it's your fault, Natsuki's tone was saying.

Yukina, rendered complicit in Natsuki's act of despotism, could say nothing, a conflicted look coming over her as she averted her eyes from Kojou.

Kojou's lips twisted in dissatisfaction, looking back at the pair with a sigh mixed in.

"I had Natsuki *and* Himeragi chasing after me. Of course I'd run! Even without knowing your reasons, whatever you want sure as hell ain't anything good. Our little New Year's incident should be evidence enough of that..."

"Y-you'd equate me with Ms. Minamiya...?!"

Kojou's frank declaration wounded Yukina, whereas Natsuki feigned innocence as she sipped her black tea.

"New Year's? Hmm, what could you possibly be referring to?" the Attack Mage said.

"Eh, if you're fine with it, I guess I'm fine with it, too..."

When Natsuki put on a front brazen even by her standards, Kojou gave up on rebutting her any further. It was almost unthinkable composure for the culprit who'd attacked Kojou only a few short days prior. Put differently, it was as if her battle with Kojou and the others on New Year's hadn't been a serious effort on her part.

"More importantly, let's get to the point. Astarte, show them the data."

"Accepted."

The maid-attired homunculus spread a bundle of photocopies over the table.

There were damage reports with pictures of ships that had run aground or collided with one another. One page was a summary of the others. The data

was on shipping incidents occurring across the entire area surrounding Itogami Island. Astarte had apparently pieced the report together.

“This is that shipwreck incident thing from yesterday? Ships missing their stops at Itogami Island?” Kojou asked with chains still binding his arms and legs.

He’d heard about it from Rin, but seeing actual data with his own eyes made him understand the gravity of the incidents.

However, Astarte looked back at Kojou’s sober face and shook her head.

“Negative. All the incidents in this report took place prior to noon today.”

“Noon *today*...? You mean, just today, there’s this many?!”

This time, Kojou outright gawked as he gazed at the thick pile of paper. Yukina, too, gasped in visible astonishment.

“The total number of incidents that have been reported is twenty-one. Seven incidents of going off course from engine or electrical trouble. Four cases of collisions or running aground, two incidents of illness among the crew, and the other eight incidents—”

Astarte summarized the situation in a businesslike tone. However, even without hearing the detailed contents, the abnormal figures made it crystal clear: Mere coincidence could not account for such numbers.

“This is where the incidents took place. What do you think?”

Natsuki spread a map over the table. The X marks written in red ink indicated the locations of the various incidents. They were occurring in a seemingly random pattern within a broad range, centered on Itogami Island.

“You’re asking what I think, but...aren’t the incident locations pretty spread out?”

“Apparently. The damaged ships have no particular commonalities. They range from coast guard patrol boats to fishing boats, spread out all over the place. They’re not included in the number of incidents listed here, but several ships registered overseas and smuggling vessels have apparently been seized while adrift,” Natsuki explained, though rather bored of it all. “If someone asked me what strongly connects them, I can only muster that all the ships in

the incidents were heading to Itogami Island. And unable to arrive, they turned back for the mainland.”

“Are the ships leaving Itogami Island all right?” Kojou asked, suspicious of the circumstances.

If that many incidents are happening, is it even possible the ships leaving Itogami Island are unscathed...? he thought, mystified.

“No damage. The same applies to aircraft. Thanks to that, the island’s harbor and airports have been emptied. Traffic has only been going one way, after all.”

“So that’s what’s been going on...”

Kojou’s voice quivered as the gravity of the situation sank in.

If incidents were occurring to only the ships and aircraft approaching Itogami Island, this was clearly a man-made *attack*. The culprits’ objective was probably to isolate Itogami Island by cutting off its shipping routes.

As an artificial isle, Itogami Island relied on shipments from the mainland for most of its necessities for everyday life. Should those supply lines be cut, the continued existence of the Demon Sanctuary was in jeopardy.

“Ms. Minamiya, I now understand just why you bound senpai.”

“Do you now?” said Natsuki, raising an eyebrow.

“You suspected this abnormality might be his doing, did you not?”

“Mm, precisely.”

“...What? *My* fault? How’d it turn into that?”

Kojou gazed at Natsuki incredulously. Even if she hadn’t done it out of pure spite, that didn’t mean he acknowledged her reason for binding him in the golden chains.

“What do I get out of shoing away every ship that gets close to Itogami Island?”

“I bound you so I could get to the bottom of that.”

“This is an illegal interrogation!! I have rights, you know!!”

“However, the possibility that these incidents were caused by a sorcerous barrier is high,” Yukina cut in, tone grave.

“Well, I suppose you’re right about that,” Kojou conceded.

If it were only one or two ships that were damaged, the incidents might have been caused by sabotage. However, there were simply too many incidents to account for. It was far easier to believe that some curse was affecting only the ships and aircraft headed to Itogami Island, or that someone had deployed a barrier that attacked anything that threatened to breach it.

In that case, the problem was the effective range of the barrier.

The shipping incidents had taken place in seas within a radius of over a hundred kilometers, all around the water surrounding Itogami Island. The surface area was sufficient to cover the whole of the Tokyo Metropolis.

“After all, it would take something on par with a vampire primogenitor to serve as the magical source for a barrier covering such a range. I thought I’d capture you, and that would be that, but unfortunately, my hopes have been dashed.”

“This has become rather troublesome, yes.”

Natsuki and Yukina glanced sidelong at Kojou as they sighed in apparent dejection.

Kojou appeared deeply uncomfortable as he glared at the pair. “Why are you so disappointed I’m innocent...?! For that matter, you don’t need these chains anymore, so take them off already!”

“All right. For the sake of argument, if Kojou Akatsuki is not the cause—”

“I told you already, it’s not me!”

Natsuki ignored Kojou’s annoyed utterance as she shifted her gaze toward Yukina.

“I would like to hear your opinion as part of the Lion King Agency, as a specialist in sorcerous terrorism countermeasures. Does any ritual to deploy a barrier on this scale come to mind?”

“I am uncertain...but if I was to speak of possibilities, feng shui, perhaps?”

Yukina thought for a while before responding in a halting manner. Natsuki immediately froze, almost as if the wind had been knocked out of her lungs.

“Feng shui, you say? I see, Qimen Dunjia...!”

“Yes.”

“Qimen...?”

Kojou wore a dubious expression as he watched Natsuki remain unnerved.

“Isn’t feng shui mostly for divination? You place things in certain spots, change the color of your purse to gain greater prosperity, that thing...? What does that have to do with this incident?”

Even Kojou, someone with little interest in ritual spellcraft, had heard of feng shui. In the first place, there was a famous line of Demon Sanctuary products sold at airport kiosks relating to it, and there were even smartphone apps in circulation.

“No... The methodology underlying feng shui is used not just for divination but also for large-scale spellcraft.”

In place of Natsuki, who maintained her silence, it was Yukina who replied: “Among them, tactical qimen is of particular use as a method of warfare—a large-scale military ritual governing the weather, a matter of life and death for troops everywhere.”

“Military ritual...?”

“Yes. Climate conditions, battlefield terrain, and the morale and physical condition of the soldiers are crucial tactical elements. Even today, military organizations around the world are conducting large-scale research into freely manipulating these via feng shui.”

“Seriously...?”

Yukina’s explanation threw Kojou into confusion. If feng shui had that level of power, certainly it was possible that it had caused these shipping incidents. He could understand the logic of military organizations researching it, too.

If such a ritual was being employed against Itogami Island, however, didn’t that mean Itogami Island was under military attack?

“I see. Making use of the dragon lines flowing in the nearby seas, it is not impossible to cover Itogami Island in an Eight Trigrams Formation, is it?” Natsuki said as she placed her now-empty teacup upon the table.

Yukina gave a vague nod. “Yes. However, I do not know whether a caster capable of controlling such a large-scale circle without anyone noticing it even exists—”

“Tartarus Lapse,” Natsuki interrupted.

“Eh?”

“I know of only one similar case. The case of the destruction of Europe’s Iroise Demon Sanctuary—one of the ringleaders was extolled as a brilliant feng shui practitioner.”

“Iroise...?”

Where’s that? Kojou wondered. It was the first he’d heard of the place.

Yukina put a finger to her temple, seemingly rummaging through her memories, when she said, “That is the incident that caused the abandonment of the Pacific Ocean Demon Sanctuary six years ago, was it not? Were the causes of that not erosion in the city’s power plant and flooding caused by a typhoon?”

“That was the story given to the public,” Natsuki responded with a slow shake of her head.

“But that is at odds with the facts. That city was destroyed by sabotage... Sabotage from Tartarus Lapse.”

“Tartarus Lapse... And they are?”

“Destroyers. They’re a wrecking crew that commits sorcerous terrorism for profit. At the very least, that is what they call themselves. Even I do not know more than that. Surely the Lion King Agency has more information about them?”

Yukina answered Natsuki’s question with silence.

Yukina, at the lowest extremity of the organization, certainly hadn’t been told anything about this Tartarus Lapse organization. Put differently, it meant even the Lion King Agency hadn’t anticipated the current situation on Itogami Island.

“But six years isn’t all that long ago, huh...?”

Kojou inclined his head as he murmured.

Even across the entire world, there weren’t many cities known as Demon Sanctuaries. One among them had been destroyed. There had to have been quite a stir at the time. And yet, Kojou didn’t know a thing about it.

“Something like that really happened? I don’t remember anything about it, though...” Suspicion was thick in his voice.

“Of course not,” Natsuki said. “The government of Japan included, various international organizations desperately covered it up.”

“Covered it up?”

“A tiny, no-name-worth-mentioning criminal organization had destroyed an entire city. If information like that leaked, it would have set off a worldwide panic... Particularly in fellow Demon Sanctuaries.”

“So they put out disinformation...? They can really pull that off?”

Kojou had a grave look in his eyes. Erasing the fact that an entire city had been destroyed—if that was possible, he felt like he wouldn’t be able to believe a single word of publicly announced information again.

A city had been destroyed, and all news about it had been swept under the rug without people having any chance to learn the truth. Furthermore, the criminals that had caused its destruction remained at large to that day.

However, *That is an exception*, bespoke the look Natsuki returned Kojou’s way. She said, “That is because, very conveniently, precious few people knew the truth. Even the survivors of Iroise had little understanding of what had been done to them.”

“So someone’s hired these wreckers, and this time, they’re out to smash Itogami Island...?”

“I am merely saying it is a possibility. The method by which this Tartarus Lapse group destroyed Iroise has never been explained, you see.” Natsuki spoke in a cool, rational tone. “However, records remain of an unnaturally large number of incidents in the surrounding seas just before Iroise’s destruction. I do not need

to spell out that this greatly resembles Itogami Island's current situation."

"Ms. Minamiya, do you know the identity of Tartarus Lapse's feng shui practitioner?"

Perhaps Yukina sensed something from Natsuki's manner of speech, for she posed the question without forewarning.

"Hmph," went Natsuki.

Kojou could feel the vivid dismay from her exhale.

She continued: "Takehito Senga—he would be around forty years old by now. A world-leading employer of tactical qimen. Neustria in Europe has employed him as a military consultant in the past."

"So if you find and capture him, you can break the Eight Trigrams Formation thingy?"

Kojou looked as if he was getting his hopes up when he checked to see. The fact that Natsuki acted like she knew this Senga guy's past tugged at him, but he pretended not to notice.

"Logically, that would be so. Assuming this is truly Tartarus Lapse's doing, that is." Natsuki turned her face toward the homunculus girl waiting attentively behind her. "Astarte, contact the Island Guard. Have every surveillance network on the island look for Takehito Senga. Make it top priority."

"Understood," Astarte replied with a neutral expression as she took out a specialized communication device.

Watching this unfold, Natsuki remained relaxed on the couch as she elegantly snapped her fingers. The space above the table rippled, and a triple-layer cake stand filled with extravagant treats appeared out of thin air.

"As a special treat, I shall grant you some of my tea pastries, Yukina Himeragi. After all, even I am out of my element where geomancy is concerned. Your opinion has been quite informative."

"No, I didn't do anything to..."

Yukina shook her head; Natsuki's nigh-unthinkable hospitality seemed to frighten her.

Then Natsuki turned her beautiful, gemstone-like eyes toward Kojou and said, “Just to make this clear, do not involve yourself where you do not belong, Kojou Akatsuki.”

“I wouldn’t if you begged me,” he said, sulking.

Even if he was a feng shui practitioner, Takehito Senga’s flesh and blood was surely that of a normal person. Kojou’s power was useless against such an opponent. After all, the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire, were too powerful—not the sort of thing to be used against human opponents.

“Never mind that, won’t you do something about these chains already...?”

Lifting his two arms, still bound by golden chains, Kojou glared at Natsuki in dismay.

Natsuki tossed an annoyed glance at Kojou before spitting out, “Goodness, you make so much trouble for others.”

“This is your doing, dammit!”

The instant Kojou’s voice went coarse in outrage, Astarte, operating her communication device, called out to Natsuki quietly: “Master.”

“What is it, Astarte?”

The look in Natsuki’s eyes sharpened. Astarte reported in a mechanical, businesslike tone, “Emergency message from Island Guard HQ. Code orange has been declared for all Attack Mages assigned to the Gigafloat Management Corporation.”

“Orange, you say...?! ”

Natsuki let out a brief murmur as she grabbed the communication device Astarte held out. Her highly unusual reaction prompted Kojou and Yukina to look at each other’s faces.

“What? Something bad, Natsuki?”

“Earlier, two senior executives of the Gigafloat Management Corporation were killed by a sniper.”

“...Sniper?”

Dumbfounded, Kojou echoed the words. They barely felt real.

Assassinations had occurred on Itogami Island. Someone had shot executives of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. It was surely connected to the continuing blockade of Itogami Island via a feng shui barrier.

First, halt the distribution of goods. Then, eliminate the corporate managers that would be developing countermeasures— One by one, the *go* stones for Itogami Island’s destruction were being carefully laid in position.

“So the objective is to throw the Corporation’s command structure into chaos... It’s certain, then. This is a terrorist attack, and the Demon Sanctuary is the target. Someone is attempting to destroy Itogami Island.”

Natsuki’s voice, lacking its usual youthful lisp, echoed heavily throughout Kojou’s chest.

“Tartarus Lapse...!”

Kojou’s unintentional murmur trickled out between clenched teeth.

7

An atmosphere of unrest enveloped the offices of the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

The incident reports involving ships and aircraft had increased without pause. There was the halt in the distribution of goods and the resulting economic losses. And then, the deaths of two senior executives—it was a crisis never before seen. Even when an evil god had emerged, or when Itogami Island was predicted to lose all magical power, the Corporation had never been in this much of an uproar.

With one branch of the Corporation after another falling into paralysis, countermeasures for the situation fell to Kazuma Yaze, chief manager of the city’s administration office working directly for the city council.

“That’s right, hurry up and determine the sniping points and the sniper. Dispatch protection teams to all senior executives. Reorganize our security

considering the possibility our schedules have leaked.”

Kazuma issued one directive after another to his subordinates as he perused the reports piled before him.

The chief manager and his subordinates had been working nonstop since the night before without a single wink of sleep. Even so, the situation had only grown worse. They could simply gaze with astonishment at the sight of damage to the city increasing, with the cause of the string of incidents still unknown.

“Chief. News from the Aviation Division. As of thirteen hundred hours, there have been six new aircraft-related incidents. Similarly, there have been numerous shipping incidents. An accurate tally is currently being tabulated.”

“I see. Though, having come this far, there isn’t really room for doubt, is there?”

When he listened to his blue-haired secretary’s report to the end, Kazuma slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes.

As he did, the secretary placed a fresh cup of coffee before him and prompted, “Large-scale sorcerous terrorism, then?”

“What is the Attack Mage Branch’s view?”

Kazuma inquired without replying to her question. The homunculus secretary showed no sign of her mood being dampened as she replied immediately.

“At present, a recon team of four Federal Attack Mages has been dispatched to investigate incidents at sea.”

“Still at that stage when the first incidents occurred over twenty-four hours ago? Taking their sweet time, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

The secretary’s expression did not change as she nodded.

Kazuma sank into silence with displeasure on his face. The two senior executives who had been assassinated were individuals managing the artificial isle’s internal security and demon registry, respectively. With those two absent, the command structure of the largest source of combat power under the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s aegis—the Island Guard—was in chaos.

That was probably why the pair had been targeted to begin with.

If so, assassinating VIPs and cutting them off from supplies was only one stage in the snipers' plan.

Their actions had to have some sort of objective—something fouler, viler. Even though he knew this, there was nothing Kazuma could do about it. They'd been completely robbed of their authority to lead. The snipers had accurately targeted the vitals of the Gigafloat Management Corporation—and the Demon Sanctuary itself.

"Quite a racket here, Chief."

A man wearing a kimono emerged from the director's office, a look of scorn coming over him as he gazed at Kazuma and his panicked subordinates.

This was the wielder of the greatest authority in the famed Yaze family, with numerous large-scale industrial concerns under its belt, and honorary chairman of the Gigafloat Management Corporation—Akishige Yaze, Kazuma's biological father.

"Chairman Yaze...", Kazuma murmured in a tone filled with reverence.

Akishige glanced at Kazuma with a stern look in his eye. "If the man running an organization appears faint of heart, morale in the lower ranks will suffer. Strive to maintain perfect composure at all times."

"I have no excuse."

Kazuma courteously lowered his head. The men assembled around and walking alongside Akishige trained scornful glances toward Kazuma. Kazuma's mother was not Akishige's formal wife. Even if he was the son of the current head, Kazuma was scorned by members of the family as an illegitimate son.

Perhaps the fact that Kazuma had climbed the ranks on merit alone, enough that he was said to be Akishige's successor, had fanned the flames of enmity even further, but Kazuma pretended not to notice.

"Chairman, where are you going?"

"After meeting with City Councillor Hashimura, I am scheduled to attend the Sorcerous Society's commemorative ceremony."

“Commemorative ceremony...?!”

Kazuma’s eyes widened in shock. With so many people coming and going, a ceremonial hall was a sniper’s paradise.

“But the Island Guard is on Alert Level Two...”

“Are you saying I should seclude myself within a bamboo cage out of fear of mere assassins?”

Akishige chewed out Kazuma. As the leader of a vast organization and the chairman of a major conglomerate, it was inexcusable for him to show weakness to criminals. Even if it placed Akishige’s life in peril, he intended to see things through.

“...I will increase security. Please take care of yourself and avoid open areas.”

“Understood.”

With a solemn nod, Akishige turned his back on Kazuma, who let out a heavy, strained sigh as he watched the group depart.

A moment later, the blue-haired secretary addressed Kazuma. “Chief, we’ve received concerning news about Attack Mage Minamiya.”

“Attack Mage Minamiya? The Witch of the Void... What is it?”

“This is the data she sent—”

Peering into the communication device the secretary handed him, Kazuma let out a tiny murmur, for displayed therein was data on the sorcerous terrorism suspects that the entire Attack Mage Branch had been unable to unearth.

The Demon Sanctuary destruction group—Tartarus Lapse.

“Why didn’t the Attack Mage Branch realize this?”

“Information on Tartarus Lapse has been designated top secret. All data has been archived. Regular investigators are not authorized to view it,” the secretary replied calmly.

Kazuma clicked his tongue.

“Begin procedures to disclose the information immediately. After that, contact the Lion King Agency. There have to be operatives of theirs inside

Itogami City. Request cooperation. And don't take no for an answer."

"Acknowledged."

The blue-haired secretary returned to her seat. In his mind, Kazuma desperately tried to calculate the personnel he could assign to apprehend the criminals.

Now that they'd determined it was organized sorcerous terrorism, they'd immediately request assistance from the Japanese government in any other case. However, even if they demanded extra investigators, all aircraft heading to Itogami Island had already been rendered unable to fly.

This situation, too, was doubtlessly part of the culprits' goals. In the end, they had to oppose Tartarus Lapse with only the limited fighting strength left on the island.

Kazuma nervously bit his lip. "Shit... Do I call Motoki... Heimdall back? But the problem with that is—"

BOOM— Suddenly, there was a dull vibration throughout all of Itogami Island. Even the giant structure that was Keystone Gate experienced tiny tremors. It was an impact reminiscent of a meteorite crash.

The pile of files scattered all over the floor as the lights within the office cut out several times over.

"What was that vibration? What happened?!"

Kazuma turned back toward his blue-haired secretary and shouted. Even in this situation, the homunculus woman was calm.

"Fire has broken out in the third underground parking lot. It is possible an explosive was employed."

"An explosive...?"

For an instant, Kazuma felt like his mind was receding far away.

Most of the members of the Island Guard's security teams were watching for snipers. Did that mean someone had gotten behind them and set an explosive underground?

“Chief!”

The face of a staffer taking a call over an internal line twitched as he called out to Kazuma.

“Honorary Chairman Akishige Yaze’s car was in the third underground parking lot—”

The staffer’s report, virtually a scream, left Kazuma at a loss for words.

The blue-haired secretary operated a terminal as she stated in a calm, flat voice, “Chairman Yaze’s vitals...have been lost.”

8

Nagisa Akatsuki realized that something had shifted inside her.

Likely, the trigger for that was the vision she’d seen at Kannawa Lake.

It was as if she’d woken from a long dream. Everything she could see felt dear to her.

The clear, blue sea. The midwinter sky.

She felt such nostalgia for the supposedly familiar sights of Itogami Island that it was hard to breathe.

And the tightness in her chest when she exchanged words with Kojou was suffocating.

Just seeing him send a smile Yukina’s or Asagi’s way was enough to make tears pour out of her eyes.

“Uuu... What’ll I do? I won’t even be able to look at Kojou’s face at this rate...!”

Nagisa clutched her head in anguish as she stood by herself in a seaside park.

Just meeting Kojou’s eyes made her chest throb. Every casual gesture of his made her rejoice—*I’m acting like a maiden in love*, she thought. Even though she thought it was ridiculous, she couldn’t properly control her emotions. At the current rate, it was only a matter of time before her friends from class caught on.

It was because Nagisa had found those misty feelings too much to handle that she had finally raced out of school.

“It’s not like I can talk to anyone about this... I mean, really, what’s with this feeling? And I thought I’d calm down a bit once I got back to Itogami Island...”

Nagisa put her weight against a handrail as she let out an exhausted sigh.

Nagisa was at the coastal park at the northern extremity of Island South. With the sea between them, the wedge-shaped Keystone Gate was visible on the opposite coast. She had no special reason to go there. After leaving school and walking around for a while, she’d simply arrived, almost as if drawn to the place.

Even as she gazed absentmindedly at the scenery, thoughts of Kojou remained in a corner of her mind.

Somehow or other, Nagisa understood the cause.

Inside Nagisa rested a soul that was not her own. And the memories of the still-sleeping girl were having an effect on Nagisa’s emotions.

She did not know who the girl truly was. Nagisa was certain she was not an evil being, though.

Right now, the only thing the young girl desired was to watch over Kojou. That was no doubt why Nagisa had accepted her.

That said, she’d never thought an issue like this would arise because of it, even in her wildest dreams.

“What do I do...?”

Once more, Nagisa put her bewilderment into words.

She didn’t know who she ought to talk to at a time like that.

Nagisa’s mother, Mimori Akatsuki, was a chief of research, but while she was a doctor, she was not a spiritualist. Her grandmother, Hisano, was an accomplished spiritualist, but unfortunately, she was deep in the mountains in Kansai, far, far away from Itogami Island. Of course, she couldn’t open up to any of her friends in class, let alone Kojou himself—that was simply out of the question.

“Kanon might listen to me, but I don’t know how she’ll react, so I’m a little afraid...”

Nagisa frailly murmured to herself. Kanon was so benevolent, even if Nagisa told her she was in a bind from liking Kojou, she might not actually see why there was a problem with that. Indeed, she might well encourage the two to get along even “better.”

In the end, with no answer forthcoming, Nagisa absentmindedly gazed at the sea, when— “Here.”

Suddenly, something cold pressed against the back of her neck.

“Hyaa?!”

The powerful and completely unexpected stimulus made Nagisa cry out.

When Nagisa turned around, her eyes were met with a cup of ice cream. An unfamiliar girl wearing a motorcycle helmet was standing there, holding it.

“Want a bite? Lulu’s ice cream. It’s delicious.”

Standing there was a foreign girl, her skin as white as snow. She was far more petite than Nagisa’s initial assessment. The girl was wearing platform shoes, but that only left her barely tall enough to not have to look up at Nagisa.

“Huh?! Um...why?”

It was not out of wariness that Nagisa prompted back, but simple surprise.

The girl coercively pressed the ice cream into Nagisa’s hand as she said, “You seemed to be worrying about something. I just happened to notice. When you’re down in the dumps, sweet stuff really is best!”

The girl was surprisingly adamant about this.

Wrapped up in the girl’s unique atmosphere, Nagisa unwittingly nodded along. Certainly, the girl had a point. The power of sweet things was tremendous, indeed.

“Um, thank you very much. I’ll pay you back for it.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine—you can thank me by putting up with me. I mean, I’d rather eat something tasty with someone else than eat it all alone.”

The girl spoke as she retrieved her own cup of ice cream from a pocket. It was Itogami Island's famous Lulu's brand. Using the little spoon included, she took a bite of the ice cream.

"Delicious," she murmured, raising a childlike voice of admiration.
"December."



“Huh?”

“My name. I like it, so I’d be happy if you called me that.”

Sliding her goggles up her helmet, the girl named December narrowed her eyes—eyes that seemed to glimmer blue.

“Ah yes.” Nagisa nodded. “Got it.”

“Good, good.” December smiled with visible satisfaction. “And you? What should I call you?”

“Nagisa. Nagisa Akatsuki. The kanji are written like this.”

“Mm, mm. Nagisa Akatsuki... Huh.”

December’s big eyes seemed to peer into the back of Nagisa’s own. Nagisa had the mysterious sense that the girl was looking through her, right to the depths of her mind. Yet somehow, it was a nostalgic feeling. It didn’t seem like she and the girl were meeting for the first time.

“I see, so that’s what it is...,” December murmured with a gentle smile.

Nagisa blinked her eyes, perplexed. However, December’s shoulders sank, seeming somewhat in a bind as she said, “I knew *she* was here, but who would think we would meet together like this... Well, I suppose such is destiny. It’s hard for both of you, isn’t it?”

“Okay...”

Nagisa could only vaguely nod. That must have been enough for December, because she explained no further, content to bring more delicious ice cream to her mouth.

“Um... Miss December, what are you doing here...?”

“You don’t need to use *miss*. Miss December, that’s like adding a date to it, yes? Like December the third or something.”

“A date... Ah, okay...”

December’s weird hang-up confused Nagisa, but it wasn’t as if she didn’t understand what the girl was trying to say.

“I came...to observe.”

“Observe...you say?”

“That’s right. Because when I told him, ‘I’ll watch over you,’ he said, ‘I don’t need you.’ So I decided I’d eat some ice cream and watch from a nice perch. Should be just about time...”

“Time?”

For what? Nagisa was uncertain. If it was waiting for the buildings to illuminate at night, that was long in coming, and she didn’t think there were any events conducted during daylight on a normal day in the middle of a nowhere place like that.

“Are you watching Keystone Gate?”

“Mmm, not exactly.”

December tossed her empty ice cream cup into a nearby garbage bin as she smiled. Somehow, it seemed like a lonely, resigned smile.

“I came to watch the beginning. The beginning of this Demon Sanctuary’s *downfall*—”

“Huh...?”

Before December finished, a flash of light bounced into the corner of Nagisa’s vision.

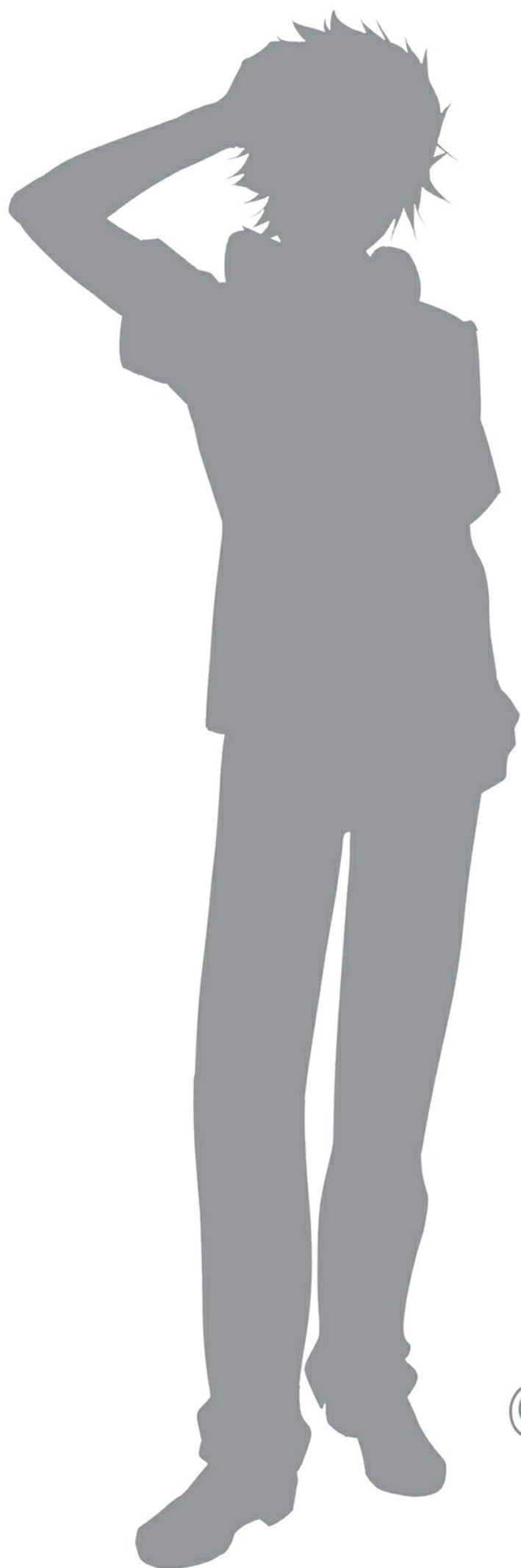
A second later, a roar slammed into her eardrums. Itogami Island’s artificial ground shook, and as a side effect, the gigafloat upon which Nagisa and December stood shuddered as well.

The exteriors of buildings crumbled, with debris thereof dancing in the sky. There had been an explosion—an explosion under Keystone Gate. A giant explosion sufficient to rock the very ground.

“Keystone Gate...!”

Shocked, Nagisa looked at December. *How did she know that there was going to be an explosion? What did she mean by the Demon Sanctuary’s downfall—?* Countless questions swirled inside her mind.

But before she could voice her concerns, Nagisa's entire body lost its strength.
Her mind was going blank. She was falling into an irresistible sleep.
The last thing Nagisa saw was December's eyes.
Her eyes glowed blue, like a flame.



CHAPTER TWO DECEMBER

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DECEMBER

1

The girl was immersed in a transparent-crimson liquid.

She was a poor sight.

Her skin was deathly pale like that of a corpse, no sign of blood coursing through her veins. Her entire body had deep wounds carved into it, openings seemingly made by sewing needles. It was a horrid sight, as if her flesh, after being rent apart, had been haphazardly forced back together.

And yet, the girl was still beautiful.

With her eyes closed, the girl's face was refined. Her slender physique possessed splendid symmetry, and her black hair gave off a luster as it floated in the fluid that resembled fresh blood.

It was an underground lab chamber filled to the brim with cutting-edge medical devices— As the girl floated in the glass container, a baby-faced woman wearing a shabby white coat looked up at her.

“Mm-hmmmm.”

With the wooden spoon from a delicious, locally popular brand of ice cream in her mouth, the woman in the white coat hummed.

This was Mimori Akatsuki, chief researcher at the Itogami Island lab belonging to MAR—Magna Ataraxia Research Inc. She turned to the lapel microphone attached to the collar of her white coat and innocently called out to the girl.

“Good morning, Princess. Can you hear me...?”

“A...ga...”

After a brief delay, the girl covered in wounds opened her eyes. Her hollow gaze jumped about before settling into a glare directed at Mimori as the woman

stood before the vat. The girl's throat quivered, as if she was trying to plead something, but nothing came out save for an agonized groan devoid of meaning.

"There's no need to be hasty... You have only *just returned to life*, after all."

Speaking in an airy tone of voice, Mimori smiled softly. The graphs on the measuring devices placed around the vat changed, as if conveying the emotions of the wounded girl in her stead. Mimori checked them as she operated the vat's panel.

"...Gaa.....?!"

Metal plugs impaled the girl from two connectors embedded in her neck. The girl's entire body twitched as she writhed in agony.

Mimori calmly gazed at the sight, smiling and letting out an amused giggle.

"You seem to be in a good mood, Chief Akatsuki."

A young man wearing glasses on a delicate face smiled as he walked over. He wore black Chinese-style clothing and gave off an air somehow reminiscent of a mystic from ancient times.

"Oh my, oh my... What is an escaped prisoner doing in a place like this, I wonder?" Mimori smiled ironically as she looked back at the young man—Meiga Itogami.

"Your cooperation is greatly appreciated. Thanks to you, my life as a fugitive has been quite a comfortable one."

The only hard part has been dealing with this witch..., he thought, straining a smile as he politely bowed his head.

Hmmm, murmured Mimori, unmoved. Behind her back, she hid the cooler box hanging from her shoulder.

"Even so, no ice cream for you."

"That is unfortunate."

"It seems pretty busy up top. Is this your doing, too?"

Mimori shifted her gaze toward the ceiling of the subterranean chamber. She

was looking in the direction of Keystone Gate. The earthquake-like vibration had only come from that way a few short minutes prior.

“Hmm, I wonder. It seems that the old man has something up his sleeves, but...”

“The old man? Ah... So that’s what it is...”

Gazing as Meiga shook his head in a suggestive manner, Mimori raised her eyebrows slightly.

Meiga stared at the crimson vat behind Mimori. Even then, the girl in the vat, wounded all over, was writhing.

“So this is the trump card the Cleansers were hiding—the other Priestess of Cain, yes?” Meiga inquired, his expression thick with an aura of reverence.

“Nah, nah.” Mimori smiled, delighted, as she shook her head. “Unfortunately, you are slightly mistaken. This girl is an Oracle. There is another.”

“Another...? You couldn’t mean..... So that’s it...”

Surprise registered on Meiga’s face. The young man’s reaction lacked his normal air of composure.

As if losing interest, Mimori turned her back to him and pulled off the white glove from her right hand.

There was cable connected to a metal plug on the neck of the wounded girl that extended outside the vat. Mimori maintained her pleasant smile as she touched the cable with her bare hand.

It was as if she was making direct contact, searching inside the girl’s head...

“Now, show me what you experienced. Show me your memories of the Cleansing—”

2

A few minutes after the explosion at Keystone Gate, images of the incident were broadcast worldwide over the Internet. A giant plume of gray smoke was marring the cloudless blue sky. Kojou gazed at the shocking image on the screen

of his smartphone in astonishment.

“...What do you mean, missing?!”

Classes were over. In a corner of the classroom, Motoki Yaze was shouting into his cell phone. The other party was doubtlessly his brother who worked at the Gigafloat Management Corporation. He'd finally gotten through after repeated redials.

“That man? Caught up in a terror bombing? That ain't like him...!”

Yaze ranted in a tone of inconcealable panic.

There was a reason why his normal aloofness had been set astir. One of the casualties of the underground parking lot explosion was the honorary chairman of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, Akishige Yaze—his father.

Apparently, even at that moment, falling rubble and flooding was making search and rescue a very touch-and-go endeavor.

“Bro, why?! Let me help look! With my ability... Bro...!”

Yaze gritted his teeth, staring at his smartphone screen as the call was cut from the other end.

Apparently, when Yaze had offered to help with the search, his brother had refused, telling him he'd just be in the way.

“Your dad...?”

Kojou approached as Yaze slumped against the wall and lowered his head. Kojou didn't know what look to have on his face at times like these.

But Yaze forced a smile, lifting his face up as he said, “Seems like he was sent flying along with the parking lot and buried under rubble.”

He said it in a joking tone. Kojou was aware that Yaze's domestic environment was a difficult one, and his relationship with his father was particularly tense. Thus, the sight of Yaze bluffing like this was especially painful.

“Blown away... You mean...?”

“It's all right. Don't worry. Even my family isn't rotten enough to have anyone happy to see him bite it, me included. It'd just get us involved in a succession

war that'd be nothing but trouble."

Yaze continued in a tone much like that of a child making excuses. As he did, Asagi tendered a bottle of mineral water in front of him.

"Motoki, your face is totally pale."

"I'm all right, geez."

Yaze immediately tried to drink the water; perhaps even he'd noticed the rasp in his voice. But he couldn't open the PET bottle. There was no strength in his trembling fingers.

"Oh, lucky thing they canceled the rest of classes for the day, huh?"

"Hey, Yaze!"

Listening to the announcement coursing over the school PA system at that very moment, Yaze returned to his own seat, looking ready to make a run for it. As he grabbed his bag, Kojou watched his friend's back as he nervously called out, but all he got was a one-sided "Later!" from Yaze as he left the classroom.

Kojou and Asagi watched him go, unable to do anything about it. Even if they chased after Yaze, neither could think of any words to say to him.

"He's really pushing himself." Asagi crossed her arms as she spoke. Kojou grimaced and nodded.

"I figure even he doesn't know how to react to this sort of thing. Can't exactly tell people to stay calm at a time like this."

"Even I'm shocked... A terror bombing..."

Asagi had a gloomy expression as she exhaled. She and Yaze had known each other before primary school. Their fathers were both VIPs of Itogami Island. That alone made it hard to dismiss.

"Tartarus Lapse, huh...? Can't act like it's someone else's problem after this."

"Eh? Tartar sauce... What?"

Overhearing Kojou's murmur, Asagi gave him a suspicious look. "Tartarus Lapse," he corrected. Why would she overhear something in such a banal fashion at a time like that?

“What? How do you know, Kojou?”

“I heard about it from Natsuki. There was talk about a Demon Sanctuary wrecking team that might be after Itogami Island.”

“Demon Sanctuary wrecking team...?” she murmured, taken aback. “The heck.” She still seemed to be trying to digest what she’d heard as she glared at Kojou. “What do you mean, after Itogami Island? Why?”

“Hell if I know. Someone probably hired ‘em.”

Overwhelmed by Asagi’s onslaught, Kojou gave her that unreliable reply.

“Then...it’s that Tartar whatever that went after Motoki’s father?”

“Probably. Apparently, the ship incidents for the last couple of days might be their doing, too.”

From the way Asagi bit her lip, brooding things over, she might have finally bought Kojou’s explanation.

“...So Natsuki’s looking for these guys?”

“Yeah. The guy who put Tartarus Lapse together is this feng shui practitioner named Senga. They’re looking for him right now...and it’s not like there are other leads.”

“If it’s like *that*, just say so, sheesh.”

It felt like Asagi was verbally lashing out as she took an ultrathin notepad PC out of her bag. Apparently, she intended to invade the Island Guard’s information network, which covered the whole of Itogami Island, to search for this Senga.

“You can find him?”

“Oh, I’ll find him!”

Asagi unintentionally snapped as she smoothly operated the keyboard. Behind her outer appearance—that of a flashy high school student—Asagi was a tremendously skilled hacker, known even throughout the corporate world.

Watching the wavy lines of English letters and numbers flow onto the screen of her PC was like seeing someone cast a high-level spell; Kojou’s eyes couldn’t

pick up what she was doing whatsoever. Unable to even blithely get a word in, Kojou felt out of place as he gazed absentmindedly at the side of Asagi's sober face. Then...

“—Pardon me.”

When that clear voice echoed across the classroom, the students still present raised a unified murmur.

It was a female student wearing a middle school uniform who stood at the entrance to Kojou's classroom, carrying a black guitar case over her back. She was small, but she had an odd beauty to her that captivated anyone who saw her.

“Himeragi? What are you doing on the high school campus—?”

Seeing Yukina suddenly intrude, Kojou let out a bewildered voice.

Kojou's reaction seemed to make all his classmates hold their breaths.

Right after Kojou and Asagi had finished some kind of serious conversation, the rumored transfer student of middle school had appeared. It was easy to understand how they expected that some sort of ghastly conflict might break out at any moment.

Naturally, the strange sense of tension filling the room brought a look of apprehension over even Yukina. But she immediately hardened her resolve, stepping into the classroom and hurrying to Kojou's side.

“I am sorry, senpai. Um, it concerns Nagisa—”

Yukina's voice was brimming with nervousness. Kojou's expression hardened from the unexpected jolt.

“Nagisa...? Did something happen to her...?”

“Did she collapse again...?”

For her part, Asagi stopped tapping her keyboard and looked at Yukina.

Yukina's gaze frailly wandered about as she said, “No, it's... During noon break, she went off somewhere and has not returned to her classroom.”

“What...?” Kojou knit his brows in bewilderment, his grasp of the situation

poor.

“Her bag and shoes are gone, too, so the students in class thought she might have left early without permission—”

“Nagisa, skipping classes?” Asagi prompted with surprise on her face.

Unlike her older brother, Nagisa had a sober, serious, punctual personality. Asagi didn’t think she’d ever slip out of school without a reason. Yukina no doubt thought the same, hence why she had rushed to report as much to Kojou.

“I tried texting Nagisa, too, but she hasn’t responded.” Yukina’s face stiffened.

Sweat appeared on Kojou’s fist. “Asagi...!”

“Yes, yes. I’ll look into this before looking for terrorists.”

The unexpectedly cooperative sight of Kojou and the others left a dejected air hovering over his classmates, dashing their expectations of an epic clash. However, Kojou had no time to pay them any heed. He felt like a man clinging to hope, watching as Asagi connected to the island’s internal surveillance camera network to search for Nagisa.

“...Eh?”

But Asagi let out a small voice. *Beep* went the brief warning from Asagi’s PC.

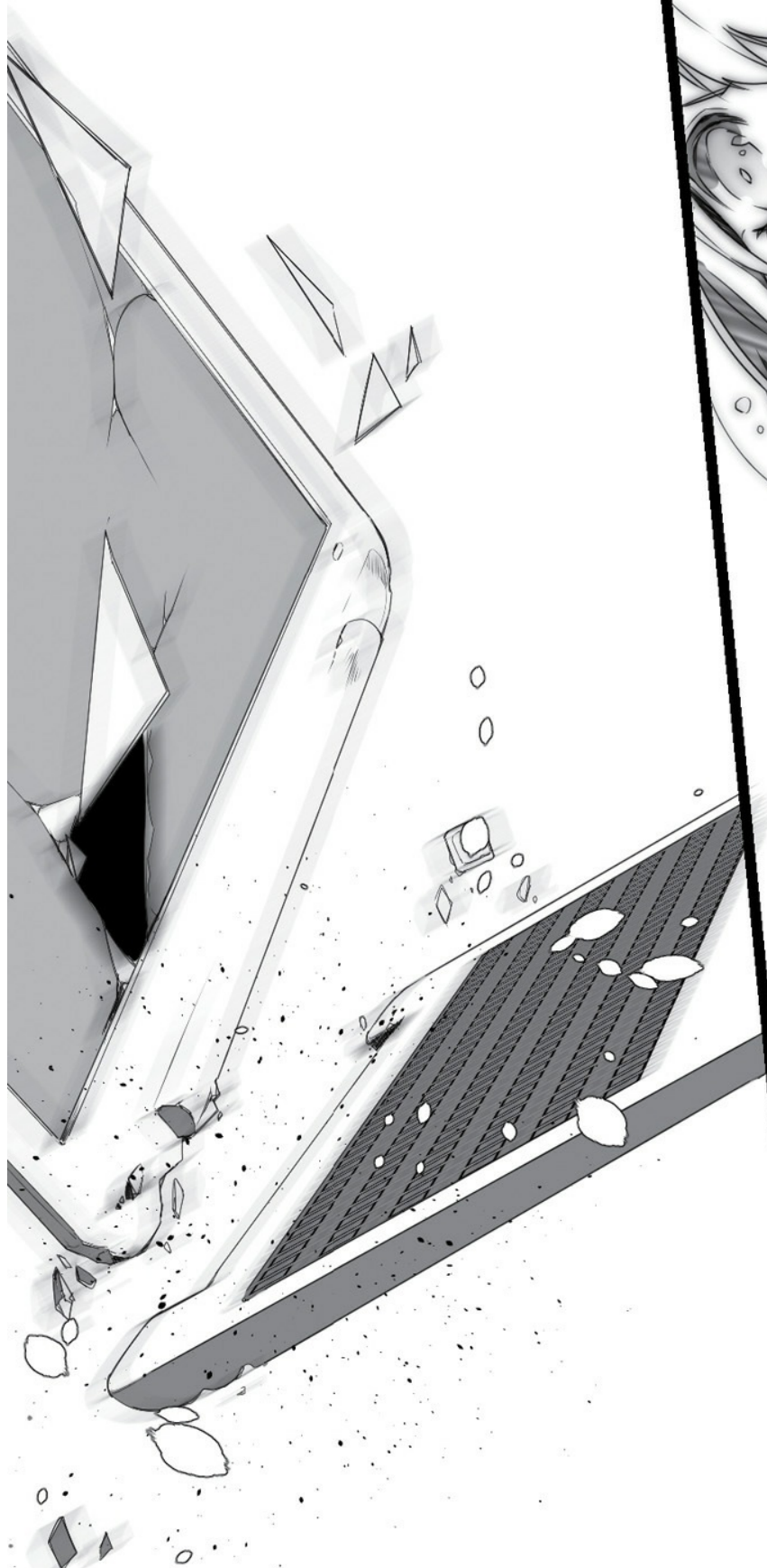
A fresh window popped up, blinking on and off with an error message in red.

“No way?! How could this...?!”

The speaker shuddered as unceasing warning sounds rang out. In the blink of an eye, error messages consumed the entire screen. Her keyboard stopped responding. Realizing this, Asagi was the first to react. Without hesitation, she stood up, clutching the haywire laptop, and shouted, “Kojou, move!”

“Huh?”

As Kojou stood rooted to the spot, Asagi thrust him aside and smashed her notebook PC against the exposed concrete of the classroom’s veranda. The aluminum composite frame bent spectacularly, parts scattering as she completely wrecked it.



“A-Asagi...?”

“Aiba...”

Kojou and Asagi both timidly addressed her. Asagi breathed raggedly as she gazed down at the wreckage of her beloved laptop.

“Someone got me good... Pisses me off!!”

Asagi stood with an aura of anger, furiously running her hand through her hair as she spoke.

“Wh-what do you mean...?”

“Hacking. The Island Guard’s network has been infected by a virus. A powerful military type!”

“A virus...?! You mean it’s a biological weapon?!”

Yukina’s eyes visibly bulged as she posed a question. Kojou wasn’t sure if she was kidding or if she had simply misunderstood, but its effect was limited to soothing Asagi’s frayed nerves.

“You can, um, set that clichéd airhead bit aside.” Asagi turned to Yukina with a drained look.

Yukina blinked, looking like a fox who’d just been picked up as she repeated, “Airhead...?”

“Ah, er, you’re wrong, you see. A virus is a name we give to a type of program... One used with ill intention to destroy data or cause malfunctions in machines.”

“Ah... Ohhh...”

Asagi had apparently come up with an explanation that even Yukina, ill-versed in mechanical devices, could digest. Yukina nodded with a vague expression, her cheeks reddening in embarrassment.

“More importantly,” Kojou began as he turned back Asagi’s way, “if the Island Guard’s been hacked, that’s bad, ain’t it?”

“Damn right, it is. With the terror bombing, the chain of command’s in chaos as it is,” Asagi earnestly confirmed.

If merely accessing the surveillance cameras exposed a system to infection, it was no doubt safe to assume the Island Guard HQ's main server was pretty much completely thrown for a loop. It was close to a certainty that the Island Guard's personnel were falling into a panic.

"It bothered me before that their defenses over there were paper-thin. This'd never have happened if they just let Mogwai and me manage it... Aw, darn it!"

Asagi's temple was twitching as she shouted in irritation. The fact that her very own PC had been nailed by a virus had apparently wounded her pride.

"Meaning that, in the end, we can't look for Nagisa, either?"

"Tough to pull off. After all, the island's anti-crime surveillance cameras are under the Island Guard's jurisdiction. There're ways to override the hacking and take back control, but with my computer in its current state..."

A smile of self-mockery came over Asagi as she gazed at the wreckage—wreckage that had been called a laptop a few scant minutes earlier. Even if she'd done it to prevent the virus from extracting personal information, the cost paid for it was by no means small.

"Aww, crap. Where the hell did Nagisa go at a time like this...?!"

Though success seemed remote, Kojou took out his cell phone and dialed Nagisa's number.

3

The girl wearing a letterman jacket was sitting on a bench at a public park along the coast.

She was standing beside a parked scooter colored white to match her clothing. A girl in a middle school student uniform was sleeping with her head on the other's lap.

Thin white smoke was climbing from a building visible on the opposite coast. Everything around it seemed in upheaval.

The girl gazed absentmindedly at that, not focused on anything in particular, when—without warning—a single man approached and called out to her.

“So this is where you were, December?”

“Mm?”

December, still wearing a half cap–style helmet, lifted her face.

Looking down at her was a middle-aged man wearing a drab gray jacket. His physique was unexpectedly muscular, but thanks to his long, unkempt hair, he had an air more like that of an artist. A sculptor or an art instructor, perhaps—somehow, that was the impression he gave off.

“Ah? Takehito?”

December spoke the man’s name—Takehito Senga of Tartarus Lapse. Once, he had been known as the Pride of the Orient, the genius feng shui practitioner who had taken Europe’s magical societies by storm.

It was this Takehito who gave December a fond smile as he commented, “Should you be out on a stroll? I would have thought you’d be waiting at the safe house.”

“You were slow in contacting us, so Raan was getting worried.”

“Oh, she was worried about me... That’s our Raan for you. So adorable.” December grinned, relaxing as she spoke.

“Goodness.” Senga shook his head.

Senga was forty years old, or thereabouts. In contrast, December was fourteen or fifteen at most. Their apparent ages were off by more than two decades. In spite of this, Senga treated December as an equal. Indeed, the impression December gave off was that of someone gazing at a cheeky younger brother.

“You’ve involved an unrelated civilian?”

It was then that Senga gave December a reproachful glare as he inquired.

“Mm? Ah, you mean Nagisa?”

December smiled with visible delight, gazing down at the side of the face of the girl sleeping upon her lap. Her hand gently stroked Nagisa Akatsuki’s hair.

“Don’t worry about her; she was surprised by the explosion and fainted. I

couldn't just leave a cute girl like this, now, could I? A bad person might abduct her."

"You speak as if we are not bad people ourselves," he said bitterly, voice dripping with sarcasm.

December raised her voice in a laugh. "Besides, this girl does have something to do with me."

"Oh, really, now?"

"Yep."

"Understood. I'll let Raan and the others know," he murmured.

December nodded once more. Then, as if out of consideration for Senga, she quietly asked him, "Takehito, you're really okay with this?"

"With what?"

"You have a history with this island, don't you?"

December's nonchalant words made Senga sink into silence. With a pained expression, as if she'd touched on wounds that remained fresh, he shook his head.

"It is because I have this history that I cannot forgive them."

"Ah. I suppose not..."

Narrowing her goggled eyes, December smiled, albeit a lonely one.

Without a word, Senga proceeded to turn on his heels and walk away. It was only several paces before all signs of his presence vanished. He had employed feng shui to melt the sight of him into the very landscape.

A moment later, Nagisa Akatsuki, clinging to December's knees, began to stir as if her sleep had been disturbed.

"Mm..."

Letting out a frail breath, Nagisa gently opened her eyes. December's eyes narrowed as she noticed the faint chill hovering about the girl.

"Hiya. You awake?"

“Ah...”

With unnatural movements that seemingly defied gravity, Nagisa’s state slowly changed. The irises of her hollow eyes stared at December, dumbfounded. Her long, unbound hair gently coursed downward.

“Thou art...”

“It’s all right, it’s all right. You don’t need to worry. This is my war, after all.”

December gently embraced the startled Nagisa. She whispered into the girl’s ear as if soothing a little child.

The cold swirling around Nagisa increased in force. A thin frost came over December’s entire body.

“...Why am...I...? At a time like this...”

“Go ahead and nod off again. After all, that is what we desire, too.”

Nagisa’s entire body was drained of strength even before December finished speaking.

Simultaneously, the powerful cold enveloping the pair vanished. December sighed in visible relief as she wiped off her chilly, foggy goggles.

By the time she brushed off the ice spread over her stadium jumper, Nagisa awoke—crisply this time.

“Ah... Er? Why am I in a place like...? Wha—?!”

Noticing that December was hugging her and holding her up, Nagisa nervously pulled away from her. She hastily surveyed the area, visibly gawking as her eyes came to rest on the opposite coast.

“Keystone Gate’s...!”

“Yeah. Some kind of accident, apparently.”

“Accident...?”

Nagisa’s memory before her collapse was vague. The intermittent sounds of emergency responder vehicle sirens passing to and from the area around the explosion were a relief to her.

“Um, by any chance, did I cause trouble for you at all?” she asked timidly.

December shook her head. “Of course not; it was no trouble at all. I had fun.”

“But...”

“Phone.”

“Huh?”

“It’s ringing. Your phone.”

December pointed at Nagisa’s bag as she spoke. Nagisa could hear the faint sound of the cell phone’s vibrator trickling out. A little surprised, she reached toward the bag at her feet.

“Wow, it really is. Eh, Kojou? Why...?”

Did I get busted for slipping out of school? she wondered as she grabbed her phone, conflicted.

As she did, December gave Nagisa a secret smile.

4

“And because the weather was nice, you nodded off before you knew it—yeah, right!!”

Kojou was indignant as he walked through the schoolyard illuminated by the evening sun. With Kojou stubbornly continuing to call, it was only a short time before that Nagisa had responded. Though relieved, Kojou could not contain his irritation at the innocent excuse Nagisa had provided.

“Dammit, don’t work people up like that. Geez...”

“Worked up or not, you two jumped on the worry train all by yourselves, sheesh.” Asagi shot a look of muted scorn Kojou’s way. It wasn’t as if this was a recent thing, but Kojou’s supposed sister complex exasperated her nonetheless.

“Regardless, I’m pleased Nagisa is all right.”

Yukina worked to somehow put the best spin on it, probably feeling somewhat responsible for unnerving Kojou to begin with.

“Well, yeah,” he said bluntly, hiding a blush. “So, Asagi, you’re gonna head straight to the Gigafloat Management Corporation, right?”

“Pile of trouble, but no choice, really. It’s not like we can leave the Island Guard servers hacked like that. I need to get a new PC, too.”

Asagi’s shoulders sank in dejection as she spoke. Time and again, she’d been the recipient of urgent calls when the Gigafloat Management Corporation was under heavy attack and pushed into a corner.

“The Corporation said it’d send a car to pick me up, so how about I give you a lift to the station?”

“Nah, it’s fine, we’re supposed to wait for Nagisa here anyway.”

Kojou thought a bit before shaking his head at Nagisa’s invitation.

Even if he nominally knew she was safe, he’d made Nagisa promise to meet up with him ASAP just to make sure. The rendezvous point was a supermarket along the street halfway to school.

“More importantly, find out where that Senga guy is and tell Natsuki as soon as you can, ’kay?”

“Mm, leave it to me.”

Asagi spoke in a lighthearted tone.

It was just then that a black-painted sedan, the courtesy car sent by the Gigafloat Management Corporation for her, pulled up to the school gates. The driver got out of the courtesy car and opened the door for Asagi. It was fairly VIP treatment.

However, the instant Asagi saw the driver’s face, she froze, completely coming to a halt.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Asagi.”

Standing there, clad in a black suit, was a young-looking woman with no visible hint of makeup—Sumire Aiba.

“S-Sumire?! Why is Sumire driving the...?!”

Asagi’s voice came out shrill as she stared in astonishment at her own

stepmother.

It absolutely wasn't that they got along poorly, but mother and daughter were fairly close in age, which complicated the relationship between Asagi and Sumire. More to the point, it was Asagi who had a tough time dealing with Sumire.

Whether aware of her daughter's feelings or not, Sumire replied with a carefree look on her face. "Mr. Sensai asked me to get youuu! I mean, there are horrible terror bombings going on, you know?"

"Ugh..."

"And the monorail has been stopped to conduct a safety inspection..."

"Ugh... Uuugh..."

"Come on, get in, get in. Kojou, if the two of you want to, I can—"

"W-we just finished speaking about that, so let's get going, please?" Asagi cut her off brusquely and climbed into the back of the courtesy car.

Her cheeks were red in an apparent blush, perhaps embarrassed at the prospect of her mother conversing with her friends.

"My, my." Sumire smiled wryly in the driver's seat. She gave Kojou and Yukina a friendly wave as she smoothly set the car into motion.

"Now, then. Guess we should head home, too..."

When Kojou, somehow feeling drained, addressed her, Yukina nodded without a word.

Not prone to speaking in excess to begin with, Yukina was more silent than usual that day. Perhaps she had the barrier via feng shui and the bombing incident on her mind. Even so, like a faithful canine following its master, Yukina maintained the exact same distance as she followed Kojou like always.

After walking for a while, the billboard of the supermarket they were heading for came into view. The parking lot was their rendezvous point, but Kojou couldn't locate any sign of Nagisa just yet.

"Right, Himeragi. Sorry, but could you come shopping with me? Nagisa asked

me to buy milk, so...”

“Of course, I do not mind at all—” Yukina’s feet abruptly came to a stop. She looked up at Kojou, seemingly hardening her resolve, and said, “But are you fine with this, senpai?”

“Mm? Ah, well, it’s sort of of a pain in the butt, but I can handle a little shopping; I’ve been sticking Nagisa with all the cooking for a while now, and all.”

“No, not that. I mean Tartarus Lapse.”

“Huh?”

Kojou looked at Yukina, finding this surprising. She paid no heed and continued.

“Senpai, aren’t you actually thinking about them?”

“Well, I mean, it’s hard not to, with Yaze’s dad and stuff.” Kojou put a hand to his neck as he sighed.

“But that doesn’t mean I can do anything about it. Besides, Natsuki just finished telling me not to get involved where I don’t belong. We don’t even know where that Senga guy is.”

“I...suppose not...”

An easy-to-read despondent expression soured Yukina’s face. She must have been feeling pangs of guilt, knowing about Tartarus Lapse’s existence yet being unable to do anything about it. That was probably the cause of her being oddly quiet for the last little while, too. It was her fundamentally sober and serious personality at work.

“I mean, if we at least had a lead on Tartarus Lapse...” Kojou nonchalantly voiced the thought as it came into his head.

“Eh?”

“If we had some idea where they’d strike next, we could go ahead of ’em and ambush ’em, right?”

“Tartarus Lapse’s next move... Meaning that assassinating VIPs and locking

out naval and air traffic is only the groundwork for the real terrorism?”

“Isn’t it? People calling themselves a Demon Sanctuary wrecking crew aren’t gonna stop at just blowing away a parking lot. There’s no way.”

“Yes. Certainly...”

Yukina’s expression grew grave. At times like these, it was easy to understand what she was thinking.

“Have to say, it’s rare to hear this stuff coming from your end, Himeragi.” Kojou smiled weakly.

“Is... Is that so?”

“If I stuck my neck into a terror incident, I figured you’d be first in line to complain, Himeragi.”

“That is natural. I am the observer of the Fourth Primogenitor, after all. I have a duty to see that you do not do anything rash, senpai.” Yukina clenched a fist, speaking as if the words were for her sake. “However, if I do not do it in senpai’s place—”

“Ah, no, that logic’s messed up. That’s not what observing means, y’know.”

When Yukina, for some reason, became exceedingly invigorated, Kojou unwittingly made light of the matter.

However, Yukina shook her head with a firm look as she said: “That will not do. The Lion King Agency exists to prevent large-scale sorcerous terrorism from coming to fruition.”

“If that’s so, other people are already on the move, right? Like that Paper Noise chick from a few days ago. No one like you needs to do anything, Himeragi.”

“No one...like me...? I suppose not...” Her expression appeared wounded. She tapered her lips like a pouting child. “After all, I couldn’t lay hand or foot upon her...”

“Er. Well, yeah...”

This conversation’s become a lot of trouble, Kojou thought, gazing up at the

heavens.

When they'd sought to escape Itogami Island, Yukina fought Paper Noise, one of the Three Saints at the head of the Lion King Agency. To be more accurate, the actual situation wasn't as much a straight fight as it was a huge loss without any idea of what was happening. Yukina still harbored a grudge about that.

"Anyway, let's leave it to them for now."

"Please do not say that and then run off somewhere without telling me, okay?"

When Kojou sank his shoulders, seemingly ready to walk off without forewarning, Yukina immediately caught his arm. To anyone watching, they looked like a close couple holding hands.

"It's all right, sheesh. I wouldn't do something troublesome like that even if you begged me."

"I wonder."

Kojou and Yukina were arguing while holding hands in the middle of the sidewalk when the driver of a light truck who just happened to be driving nearby looked at them, the truck making a cold *whoosh* as it passed. Yukina's cheeks reddened, yet, she did not move away from Kojou's side.

To avoid standing out any further on a city street, Kojou headed into the supermarket in apparent flight.

Instead of the usual, fairly catchy background music, the inside of the store was playing a news channel on the radio. Unsurprisingly, everyone probably had the shipping incidents and the parking lot bombing on their minds.

However, they could not read any particular worry or visible sadness on the shoppers' faces.

"Everyone is surprisingly calm about this," Yukina noted, mystified.

"I suppose so," Kojou agreed with a nod. "Well, residents of a Demon Sanctuary are used to this level of ruckus. I suppose being too relaxed might be a problem in itself..."

In the first place, Demon Sanctuary cities easily became terror targets.

Furthermore, Itogami Island suffered damage from typhoons and coastal flooding with particular frequency. The public-order and disaster-management countermeasures were thus well-developed. Stores of food and fuel were also quite sufficient, things that the residents of Itogami Island were well aware of.

“No, that is far more reassuring than falling into a panic. After all, it is said that one of a normal terrorist’s objectives is to instill fear in the populace and fan the flames of social instability.”

“Fear, huh...?” he murmured.

Picking a place that stood out, like Keystone Gate, as the site of a terror bombing to fan people’s anxieties was something he could comprehend.

So far as he could tell from the state inside the supermarket, the residents of Itogami Island were just managing to hold it together against the terrorists’ attacks, at least as things stood that moment.

Having finished the intended shopping, Kojou carried a plastic bag as he headed out to the front of the store.

“Come to think of it, the lady said the monorail had stopped, so how does Nagisa plan to get home?” he wondered out loud, suddenly gripped by a rather basic doubt.

Who knows? Yukina seemed to say with a tilt of her head.

Right after that, they heard a *vroo-vroo-vroom*, the pattering of an obnoxiously loud engine.

The old-fashioned scooter, sporting a gasoline engine that was quite rare nowadays, climbed up the pedestrian ramp and entered the parking lot.

“Ah... There they are! Kojou! Yukina, over here!!”

Nagisa was waving from the back seat of a scooter. In front of Nagisa and gripping the handle was an unfamiliar woman wearing windbreak goggles. “Who’s that?” Kojou asked, knitting his brows.

During that time, the white scooter stopped in front of Kojou and Yukina. Nagisa hopped right off. Removing her helmet, she turned toward the scooter’s driver and bowed her head.

“Thank you for the send-off, Miss December.”

“Hey, hey. I told you, no ‘miss’ necessary.”

The girl named December spoke to Nagisa in a flustered tone. Then, she shifted her eyes toward Kojou and said: “You’re Nagisa’s big brother?”

“Y-yeah. I am, but...”

When the bewildered Kojou replied, December shot him an amiable smile. Even with the big goggles still on her, it was clear she was quite a beauty. On top of that, she was far younger than he’d assumed.

Then, December gazed at Yukina with apparent deep interest and said, “And over here is your...girlfriend?”

“Nah, this is Nagisa’s classmate and our neighbor.”

“I see, your neighbor...” She smiled in amusement before offering her hand to Kojou. “Call me December. Pleased to meet you.”

“Ah, same.”

Kojou gave the girl’s pleasantly cool hand a shake.

Nagisa stood at December’s side, for some reason proudly puffing her chest as she said, “She was a help in all kinds of ways. You know there was an explosion at Keystone Gate, right? She was with me right around then, and she looked after me when I fainted, then sent me off all this way, so she really took good care of me. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for December.”

“Th-that so?”

Kojou winced a little in the face of his rapidly speaking little sister. She seemed like a completely different person than the gentle Nagisa that morning, but if push came to shove, this was what he would call the real her.

He was relieved that Nagisa had made a complete recovery. He wondered if that was due to her encounter with December.

“Sorry, seems like my little sister caused you some trouble. Thanks.”

“You are very welcome. It was my pleasure to take care of such a cute girl.”

Returning Kojou’s words of thanks, December teasingly curled up the corners

of her lips. Then she shifted her gaze to the interior of the glass-walled supermarket.

The store, having a tidy and functional layout, was packed to the brim with various food products. The empty fresh-fish shelf stood out, but even so, that was nothing that impacted people's everyday lives.

"How peaceful."

"Ah?"

"Even after an incident like that, they're lined up in front of a store, buying groceries like nothing happened... A reassuring sight, don't you think?"

"Mm, yeah..."

The way December murmured as if it wasn't her problem made Kojou uneasy, but he showed he was listening anyway.

December made a little giggle as she turned her scooter's key in the ignition. *Pruu!* With an unstable rhythm, the engine started, letting out the tinny, trademark sound of its exhaust.

"Later, Nagisa. We'll meet again. Kojou and Miss Neighbor, too. Bye-bye!"

With a loud putter and a boisterous noise from the vehicle, December took off. For a while, Kojou and Yukina watched the rising white exhaust smoke in a daze.

"Ohhh, Kojou, you actually bought the milk, didn't you? Okay, let's head home. We'll have stew tonight!" Nagisa's characteristically boisterous voice had returned now that she was in high spirits. She turned to Kojou once December vanished from view.

Following after his little sister, who was practically skipping with each step, Kojou let out an exasperated sigh. He couldn't mentally reconcile this rambunctious girl with the seemingly separate person who'd behaved so demurely that morning.

"She's the usual Nagisa, huh?"

"So it would seem." Yukina's face brightened. "I'm so glad."

Yukina, being in the same class as Nagisa, might have been even more thrown off by the sudden change in her than Kojou had been.

“More importantly, senpai, did you notice? Miss December, she’s—”

“Yeah,” Kojou cut in, nodding along. He’d felt something like a jolt of static electricity when shaking December’s hand. It was a stimulus he specifically felt when there was strong demonic energy.

“A demon... So it wasn’t just my imagination...”

“I believe she is likely a D-type—a vampire. She was not wearing a demon registration bracelet, though...”

“So an unregistered demon like me...” His expression grew conflicted.

In Itogami City, a Demon Sanctuary, there was no discrimination or stigma toward demons. Through registering as demons via the Gigafloat Management Corporation, they acquired not only voting rights, but subsidies for housing and medical care, assistance in finding work, and a variety of other types of support. All you had to do was show the demon registration bracelet on your wrist at any convenience store or supermarket, and your purchases were discounted and tax-free.

Put conversely, it was illegal to enter the special district unregistered without a very good reason.

Even so, there were some who rejected demon registration. There were two types: wild cards like Kojou who, for political reasons, were tolerated in silence by the government and watched but treated *as if they didn’t exist*—and criminals.

There was no way they could speak a word of that to Nagisa, who adored December.

“Himeragi.”

“Yes?”

“You said a terrorist’s objective is to cause social instability, right?”

“Ah yes. Of course there are exceptions, but as a rule of thumb...” Yukina appeared curious as she replied to Kojou’s seemingly aimless question.

His cheeks twisted, as if he'd just been forced to eat vegetables that he hated. "You remember what December said? It's reassuring to see people lined up buying food."

"Eh...?" Yukina's eyes widened as she realized something.

The reason people could remain calm after so many shipping incidents was because these events hadn't directly impacted their own day-to-day lives. Even if there were some shortages of goods, the supermarket outlets were still brimming with food. This was because Itogami Island had a vast store of food supplies.

Then, if something more was to happen, and those stores too were lost—"Tartarus Lapse's next target... It couldn't be..."

"It's just a wild guess, but I've got a bad feeling about this...!" Kojou muttered in a quiet voice so Nagisa, walking ahead of them, would not overhear. "Their next target's the large-scale food stockpile—Island East's Great Pile."

5

The black car for public use in which Asagi rode was driving on a road that looped around the exterior of Itogami Island.

Being on an artificial isle, the roads inside Itogami City itself were a complicated labyrinth of curves—and multiple vertical layers at that. The construction left car navigation systems largely worthless, and driving inside Itogami City was itself often said to be as difficult as piloting a jet fighter.

Sumire Aiba was smoothly driving along this complex assembly of streets. She had been a pro driver for a bodyguard service company right up until she married Asagi's father.

Asagi thought that her smooth driving, to the point that you didn't even feel her accelerate, was exceedingly pleasant and all the more frightening for it. Rumor had it that no matter how tangled the route, Sumire during her career arrived at her destination within 0.1 seconds of the appointed time, give or take. Just trying to imagine what kind of driving she'd do if she was actually serious gave Asagi a chill.

“Coming home late tonight?”

That one and the same Sumire turned toward Asagi, sitting in the back seat, and gently struck up a conversation.

Asagi awkwardly nodded. “I believe I probably will. The Island Guard’s server seems to have taken quite a bit of damage...”

“That so? I made lunch for you, so eat it if you like, ’kay? I made sandwiches so you could eat one-handed if need be.”

“Um, thank you very much.”

Asagi spoke her thanks as she noticed the heavy box-shaped parcel on the seat. Programming work employed physical endurance, and *superb* was the worst one could call Sumire’s cooking. Asagi was genuinely grateful for the boxed lunch.

“Did Pa...Father say anything? About today’s incident.”

“Mmm. Nothing. He’s not one to speak lightly of such things, after all.”

She continued to drive as she spoke in a slightly lonely sounding tone.

“I suppose he isn’t,” Asagi agreed.

“But he was worried about you, Asagi. He wondered if this work of yours might involve you in an incident like this.”

“Oh, come on... Him? Worry...?” Asagi murmured in a nonchalant manner. “No way.”

It was the next moment that the rear tires let out a loud *screech* as the car forcibly changed lanes. Struck by the ferocious acceleration, Asagi was shoved into the seat behind her. It was rough, very un-Sumire-like driving.

“S-Sumire...?!”

“Don’t speak. You mustn’t bite your tongue, after all—hold on tight!” Sumire shouted, speaking with a sharp tone that sounded nothing like her normal, gentle self.

With a blow that seemed to toss them upward, the public-use car danced in midair. The scenery Asagi saw through the front window was scrolling in a

seemingly impossible direction.

Sumire had deliberately rammed her front wheel into roadside concrete blocks, making the car jump.

Doing a U-turn, Asagi and Sumire's car leaped over the central divider, landing smack in the middle of the opposite lane.

And then— The world shuddered, accompanied by a great boom. A huge explosion had occurred right beside them.

“Wha...?!”

Smacked around while bathed in the blast wind, the car's body audibly vibrated.

The impact ferociously shook the road itself. Asagi's insides were struck by the unpleasant feeling of being hoisted upward.

The cause of the explosion was a broken-down car parked on the road's shoulder. The broken-down car had burst into smithereens, as if aiming for the precise instant Asagi and Sumire were passing by.

“Wh...what the hell...?!”

“A car bomb. A trick often used by guerillas in conflict zones. If you eat one at point-blank range, even antiballistic armor won't hold up.”

The car powerfully slipped along its way, with Sumire using precise counter-steering and accelerator control as she regained her poise as if nothing had happened. The car proceeded to accelerate swiftly as it evaded the metal fragments pouring down.

The aftereffects of the explosion had left a crater in the road surface, with the surrounding asphalt enveloped by flames. Road signs and guard rails that took direct hits from scattering fragments were in tatters.

“A car bomb... You don't mean that this car was the target...?”

Asagi went pale as she asked. If not for Sumire's reckless change of routes, their car would surely have charged right into the center of the explosion. And engulfed by it, the two would have surely died instantaneously.

Goosebumps covered her entire body as that fact finally sank in. Her fingertips wouldn't stop shaking.

"It's quite possible. This is a Gigafloat Management Corporation public vehicle, after all—"

Despite all that was happening, Sumire was quite calm. "We'll have to take the long way," she murmured in apparent dismay, heading for the exit of the beltway. It was composure unthinkable in a human being, especially after narrowly avoiding an attempt on her life.

"Sumire, how did you know? That it was set up as a car bomb."

"Hmm, how, I wonder? Intuition, maybe?"

Sumire tilted her head as she replied, fully serious. Apparently, even she couldn't put it into words very well. Astonished by her mother-in-law's reaction, Asagi felt a whiff of fear.

Somehow, she felt very stupid for being the only one who was afraid.

"Don't tell me, this is why you came to pick me up, Sumire? Because you thought I might get involved in another terror bombing—"

"Is the boxed lunch all right?"

Sumire did not reply to Asagi's question as she checked on something else. It was only then that Asagi finally realized she had been clutching the boxed lunch against her.

"Ah yes. I think it's all right."

"That so? I'm very glad."

Sumire gazed at Asagi's face through the rearview mirror, a big grin on her own. Then there was a *vroom* as she pushed on the accelerator once more.

"Let's leave cleaning up this mess to the Island Guard. We're gonna fly."

6

Takehito Senga gazed at Itogami Island's sunset from an abandoned factory near the harbor. Itogami Island—a Demon Sanctuary both a mass of cutting-

edge construction technologies and a sorcerous construct.

Formed of four gigafloats, each was designed to move independently to absorb the effects of typhoons and tsunamis and to keep damage from flooding to a bare minimum.

One of each was located east, west, north, and south—each with a sorcerous purpose.

The east was Seiryuu, the west was Byakko, the south was Suzaku, the north was Genbu—in other words, a feng shui Four Heavenly Kings arrangement. Itogami Island itself was placed according to one giant feng shui ritual.

By using Itogami Island's own construction, his tactical qimen could reach its very pinnacle. This was the truth behind the Eight Trigrams Formation Takehito Senga had employed. It had a radius of over a hundred kilometers by using Itogami Island itself as the power source.

The barrier would last another four days, but the island would surely be wiped off the map before then.

Wiped clean by the Roses of Tartarus— Teacher, can you hear me?

He heard a boy whose voice had yet to crack over the earphone mic on his left earlobe. The speaker was a homunculus teenage boy—Logi.

“I hear you, Logi. I saw the smoke from the explosion.”

The light of the explosion on the beltway allowed Senga to clearly see it for himself, even from his location. It was the flash of light from the car bomb Logi had set. The metal fragments scattered by a car bomb could not be easily fended off, even by a military armored car.

Three years. Back then, when certain circumstances brought Logi into Tartarus Lapse's fold, it was Senga who had taught him how to use car bombs. Logi had addressed Senga as *Teacher* ever since.

About that, sorry—I failed.

Logi spoke with a tone oozing with angst, like a child who had failed to pull off a prank.

“Failed?”

Yeah. Driver with good intuition. Escaped just before the bombing.

“Is that so? That’s a Demon Sanctuary for you—normal methods will not suffice.”

Senga’s murmur was calm and composed, not rebuking Logi in the slightest.

Bombs were a simple but highly reliable method of assassination. Also, it was impossible that Logi would have slipped up on the detonation timing. For someone to escape from the boy’s attack in spite of that meant they were not dealing with any normal foe.

I really am sorry, Teacher.

“I don’t mind. It does not impede the plan. If they think it was indiscriminate terror, it will serve as a distraction.”

...Yeah.

Logi let out a dejected voice. He felt a strong sense of responsibility by nature.

Senga spoke to him gently. “I don’t think there will be a problem, but just to be sure, perhaps some help from this end? Tell Carly and Raan to remain on standby until December instructs otherwise.”

Understood. I’ll head there right away.

Then Logi cut off the call.

Senga removed the earphone mic, stuffing it into his pocket without fanfare. Then, he slowly lifted his face. Spread around the abandoned factory site were what seemed like mountains of rusted scrap metal. Among them stood a small-statured girl, her youthful beauty like that of a Western-style doll, with the warehouse district immersed in dusk at her back.

“It seems I have kept you waiting.”

“I don’t mind. I overheard an amusing conversation.”

When Senga spoke to her, the girl shook her head with a sway of her long hair. Her tone was quite adult, but her lisping voice was appropriate to her apparent age. Senga fondly narrowed his eyes as he broke out in laughter.

“Natsuki Minamiya... Fifteen years it’s been, yes? You never change.”

“And you’ve grown old, Takehito Senga. Yet, what is inside you seems not to have grown at all.”

Natsuki wore a cold expression, her scorn apparent.

The last time he had seen her in Europe, Senga had been in his mid-twenties. At the time, Natsuki was an ordinary human being, her age exactly what it appeared to be. It was Senga himself who had taught Natsuki how to form a pact with a devil, thus providing the impetus for her to become a witch.

“I haven’t changed, you say...but I could say the same about you. The demon-slaughtering Witch of the Void—”

“That is not so.” Natsuki snorted, bored of the conversation. “Tartarus Lapse—a Demon Sanctuary wrecking crew with a fancy title, but even now, you’re just using children for your own ends, Takehito?”

“I am offended that you would characterize my work as ‘using’ them. I merely teach them how to employ their powers, just as I once did for you.”

“You claim the children destroy Demon Sanctuaries of their own will?” Natsuki’s voice carried a faint whiff of anger.

Senga nodded deeply as he acknowledged, “That I am not even Tartarus Lapse’s leader is proof by itself. It is another who leads them.”

“However, if I defeat you, the Eight Trigrams Formation will be broken... I will take my time questioning you about the rest afterward.”

Natsuki held her parasol before her as she gave it a gentle flourish. As if this was a signal, a group of armed guards appeared, surrounding Senga. They were members of the Island Guard, around the size of a two-squad unit—probably forty-odd people in total.

“I see... Certainly, you have somewhat changed.” Senga smiled thinly in apparent praise.

The old Natsuki would probably have killed Senga, no questions asked. For her to attempt to capture Senga alive—let alone employ the assistance of others to do so—was something the Natsuki of old would never have done.

Senga determined that acquiring things she needed to protect had made

Natsuki weak.

“As you are now, you cannot halt the Roses of Tartarus, Natsuki Minamiya!”

Senga, sure of victory, declared as such as he pointed a gun toward the members of the Island Guard. The next moment, an earthquake-like roar echoed across the ruined factory.

“What...?!”

The abrupt flow of explosive ritual energy, filling the area around her, made Natsuki’s expression harden.

The mountains of scrap metal left to rust inside the abandoned factory’s grounds flowed and swelled upward like sentient, living creatures. Finally, these took the form of giant humanoids, howling with the dusky sky at their backs.

7

The sun had just finished setting by the time Kojou and Yukina arrived at Island East’s warehouse district. With the bombing incident making the monorail late and heavily congested, moving there had taken longer than they’d anticipated.

Fortunately, Nagisa had gone to visit their hospitalized father, so it wasn’t very difficult for Kojou to slip out of the house without telling her. Incidentally, he’d also asked Nagisa to check on their mother, who remained camped out at the corporation. At the very least, that ought to have been enough to let them act freely without Nagisa noticing for that night.

“Figures that it’s pretty cold after the sun goes down.”

Kojou’s shoulders sank as the merciless nighttime coastal wind blew upon them.

Though Itogami Island was located in the tropics, the temperature still dropped a fair bit at night in the dead of winter. The desolate atmosphere of the warehouse district, not a soul in sight, seemed to only add to the chill.

“I was right to bring my coat.”

Yukina, wearing a coat over her usual school uniform, pressed a hand to her hair, astir from the strong wind. It was a brand-new coat Kojou had never seen before.



“Well...it certainly is pretty. Bit of a fresh look—won’t get old anytime soon.”

“Wh-what?” Yukina’s body froze as Kojou’s abrupt murmur threw her completely off. “Senpai...what are you saying out of the blue like that...?!”

“Himeragi, I thought you didn’t like that kind of stuff.”

“On the contrary, I do like it...and it’s the design Nagisa picked out for me...”

Yukina grasped the collar of her own coat, whispering in a subdued voice so quiet that her words might go unheard. Her cheeks were red from the setting sun shining on them.

However, Kojou twisted his neck as he listened, a questioning look on him as he asked: “What are you talking about...?”

“Eh? What were *you* speaking about...?”

“Er, this area was only recently reopened, right? So I was like, it’s fresh nighttime scenery.”

“Huh...? Nighttime scenery?”

As Kojou gazed at the seemingly rare Itogami Island nighttime landscape, Yukina somehow seemed to have a wounded look as she glared at him. She sighed deeply as she soon switched to despondency.

“Is that so? I suppose you’re right.”

“Well, I was thinking, too, who’d have thought I’d be looking at this landscape at night with you again?”

Not noticing the apparent sulk on Yukina’s expression, Kojou’s eyes narrowed in nostalgia. He had visited that area along with her once before.

It had been a little more than four months ago. A series of assaults on demons had been taking place on Itogami Island.

“And because you couldn’t control your Beast Vassal, senpai, you burned the whole area down to the ground...”

Surveying the large number of brand-new warehouses, Yukina spoke with a slightly teasing expression. Of course the buildings in that area looked so tidy—they’d only been rebuilt very recently. It was none other than Kojou himself

who had annihilated the old warehouse district and turned it into a parking lot.

“Himeragi, if I hadn’t done that, I couldn’t have saved you at the time, right?”

“Eh? You’re saying it was my fault?” Hearing Kojou’s retort, Yukina’s eyes went wide in surprise. “Wait just a minute. Certainly, the effect was that I was saved by you, senpai, but it’s not as if I asked you for such a thing—”

“Well, you were on the verge of being killed, weren’t you?”

“That may be true, but in the first place, had you not failed to control your Beast Vassal, senpai, there wouldn’t have been that kind of damage!”

“Couldn’t be helped. It was before I’d had any of your blood.”

“I suppose you’re right...”

For some reason, Yukina’s expression suddenly went blank as she replied. She drew her silver spear from the black guitar case she carried on her back. The spear tip contained within deployed, and the metallic shaft slid to its full length.

“Though, nowadays, it seems you drink not just from me but from a great many other girls as well—”

“Wait just a... Why are you taking your spear out *now*?!”

Kojou recoiled in fear. However, Yukina was not looking toward Kojou but to a huge factory building somewhat removed from the warehouse district. It looked like an alchemical plant that had been shut down.

The purportedly abandoned site was radiating powerful magical energy. Even Kojou, ill-versed in magical matters, could clearly sense the powerful waves it was giving off.

“Himeragi! That’s—”

“The Island Guard! Is that...gunfire?!”

Amid the darkness of dusk, there were flashes of light that seemed to come from firearms.

They could hear sounds like gunfire, too. It was an active gunfight. Members of the Island Guard were in pitched combat against someone.

“Tartarus Lapse’s target wasn’t the food stockpile...?!?”

Through Astarte, they'd reported their theory of targeting the Great Pile to Natsuki, too.

Hence, it was no surprise that the Island Guard would have located Senga and company before Kojou and Yukina.

However, the site of the factory-turned-battlefield was close to a kilometer removed from the warehouses built in long rows. Yukina, too, seemed bewildered by the unexpected turn of events.

"How could...anyone activate a ritual with that kind of range...?!"

Countless crevices, resembling glowing arteries, rose up from the warehouse district ground surface upon which Kojou and Yukina stood. Vast ritual energy assembled through the use of feng shui was coursing through the entire area.

Finally, that ritual energy was absorbed, and masses of stone and metal buried within the artificial ground began to move. They were humanoid monsters some seven to eight meters at full height—giant stone golems.

At the same time that the monsters emerged, a dense mist came over the warehouse district, swirling around and creating gusts like a tornado. The walls of the brand-new warehouses cracked, and debris blown off by the winds danced in the sky.

"Golems that control storms and waves... Could they possibly be—Stone Sentinels?!"

"Stone Sentinels?" Kojou inquired to Yukina, who was dumbfounded at the sight of the swarm. "What're they?"

"A master-level art within tactical qimen. It is said that long ago, Zhuge Liang, military strategist of the Emperor of Shu, used emplacements of them to destroy an army of fifty thousand under the banner of Wu."

"An army of fifty thousand... Seriously?"

Kojou finally came to understand just how frightening feng shui could be as an instrument of war. A single exceedingly skilled feng shui practitioner could rival a force of tens of thousands. Drawing on the dragon lines, he could employ ritual energy to manipulate giant stones and alter the weather as he willed. No

wonder they called them large-scale military rituals.

“Even your spear can’t manage, Himeragi?”

Kojou glared at the course of the enchantment floating up from the surface of the ground as he made sure. Yukina regretfully shook her head.

“After all, Stone Sentinels are animated by the energy currents of the Earth itself... Even Snowdrift Wolf cannot...”

“Figures even it can’t neutralize the whole thing! Then no choice but to do this by force.”

Kojou ferociously bared his canine teeth. If they could not prevent the feng shui from activating, there was no choice but to stop the monsters created by it. Using the power of the Fourth Primogenitor in poor visibility was a risk, but he had no time to hesitate.

“C’mon over, Al-Nasl Minium!”

Kojou’s blood seemed to boil within his body as he released a great amount of demonic energy, summoning an enormous beast out of thin air. Manifesting was a scarlet-maned bicorn, raging winds and vibrations of the air incarnate. This was a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor—the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

Vampires were served by the beasts that dwelled in their own blood.

A Beast Vassal was an amalgam of pure demonic energy. One’s very existence warped the laws of physics, consuming the host’s life force with incredible power. It was said that only vampires, with infinite negative life forces, could summon and employ Beast Vassals, making vampires the mightiest of all Demonkind.

The bicorn Kojou called forth mowed down the Stone Sentinels with its hooves. Even the golems’ solid bodies were blown to pieces, as if constructed of fine sand.

Excess force also spectacularly gouged the artificial isle’s ground, but Kojou pretended not to see. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor, comprised of overly vast power, were exceptionally difficult to control. Precise use was

nigh impossible. Even if some sacrifices had to be paid, his top priority was to whittle down the golems' numbers. But— "They're regenerating...?!"

In place of the destroyed golems, the clumps of rubble scattering about rose up in humanoid form anew. The more the bicorn destroyed them, the effect was a net increase in the golems' numbers.

"So this is how they wiped out a force of fifty thousand...?! This ain't gonna cut it!"

Kojou breathed raggedly over and over. The warehouse district, with its densely packed buildings, was ill-suited to combat employing Beast Vassals. The longer the battle, the more the rate of damage would accelerate.

"I shall defeat the caster! Senpai, buy time here while I—," Yukina shouted as she broke into a run. She no doubt thought it was not the regenerating Stone Sentinels, but Takehito Senga in the ruined factory who ought to be defeated first.

However, Yukina had run only a few strides when she stopped in surprise.

A petite girl was leaning against an old scooter, lying in wait, seemingly to obstruct her path.

"Sorry, but I can't let you do that."

The girl in the letterman jacket flashed a pained smile as she gently brushed a hand against her helmet.

Astonished, Yukina called out to the girl. "Miss...December...?!"

"You remember me. I'm so happy. But you don't need to add 'miss.'"

December was so carefree, just like the first time they'd met.

"So you really are a member of Tartarus Lapse...?"

Kojou glared at the girl during the slight pause before the golems regenerated again. Even though he saw her appear on the battlefield, her being here still felt unbelievable.

"Member? Hee-hee, that has a nice ring to it."

December gave him an amused smile.

“Kojou Akatsuki, the Fourth Primogenitor—if you like, would you become a member, too? Of course, you can bring Miss Neighbor with you. I’d happily welcome you both.”

“Like hell we will!” Kojou’s voice went ragged. “Did you get close to Nagisa because you knew she was my little sister, too?!”

“Nah. That’s not why. I’m not saying it was pure coincidence...but, hmm, when push comes to shove, I wanted to meet her more than I wanted to meet you. Either way, it’s not something you need to worry about.”

“Why did you drop us that hint? That the Great Pile would be attacked—”

“Hmm... Why, I wonder...” December shook her head, as if to say she did not truly understand it herself.

Then the girl removed her goggles. Her eyes, blue and radiant like flames, gazed at Kojou.

“It’s probably because I wanted to see you one more time.”

December bared her white fangs as she spoke—with large, sharp canine teeth particular to vampires.

8

“Himeragi, I’ll stall December.”

Kojou virtually whispered the statement to Yukina, who was at his side.

An incredibly ghastly aura was emanating from December’s small-statured body. But this suited Kojou just fine. After all, if his opponent was an unaging, undying vampire, he didn’t need to worry about restraint.

Yukina nodded, instantly discerning Kojou’s intent.

“Understood. During that time, I shall go after Senga—”

“I told you I can’t let you do that.”

As December leisurely called out, a huge shadow gently swayed behind her. It was a transparent phantom beast that seemed to be clad in thick armor. The incredible sense of might emanating from it was in no way inferior to that of

Kojou's servants.

"A Beast Vassal?!"

Yukina was about to break into a run, but her movements halted, wary of December's overwhelming demonic energy. Even among the vampires Kojou and Yukina had encountered to that point, December was clearly abnormal—it was no exaggeration to say she possessed truly enormous power. Even as her Beast Vassal scattered around a vast sense of foreboding, Kojou could not make out anything of its nature.

"Shit...! Al-Nasl Minium!"

Kojou commanded the bicorn to attack. However, a second faster than it could, December's radiant eyes caught Kojou straight in their sights.

"Withdraw, Al-Nasl Minium—!"

"What...?!"

Struck by powerful dizziness, Kojou dropped straight to his knees.

The scarlet bicorn howled, unleashing an oscillation wave shell. However, the destructive roar was not aimed toward December's Beast Vassal. A building of the nearby Great Pile was mercilessly shattered to smithereens.

"Senpai?! What are you...?!"

Yukina's voice trembled as she shouted in fright. However, Kojou did not answer. His entire body was drenched in thick sweat as he let out anguished breaths.

"Gu...o...!"

"Senpai?!"

Realizing that something was wrong with him, Yukina gasped and glared at December.

However, Yukina could not approach her in any way, for above her, the bicorn descended from the sky, standing as if to shield December from Yukina.

A huge hoof, swaying like a mirage, attempted to stomp Yukina flat, with Kojou, its host and master, along with her.

“Urkk! Snowdrift Wolf—!”

Yukina thrust out the silver spear, filling it with all the ritual energy she could. The pale glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect blade seemed to cleave the scarlet Beast Vassal’s attack apart, halting it in its tracks.

“Not bad, Miss Neighbor.”

December praised her. Even if it was by borrowing power from the spirit spear, Yukina, a mere human being, had fended off a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor. Of course December was surprised.

“But I have no room for restraint. I’d prefer if you withdrew before you got hurt...”

“That’s not...!”

As Yukina tried to reject the offer, she felt new, powerful demonic energy emerge behind her. The source of the demonic energy was Kojou, groaning in pain, last she checked. Under December’s quiet gaze, Kojou was attempting to summon a new Beast Vassal.

A minotaur materialized, its flesh formed of molten amber. This was Beast Vassal Number Two, Cor-Tauri Succinum— “Wha...?”

Yukina let out a murmur of despair. Even Snowdrift Wolf’s ability could not fend off two servants of the Fourth Primogenitor at the same time.

Its entire body enveloped by scalding magma, the minotaur Beast Vassal swung the battle-ax that was equal to its own height. Its target for attack was a building in the center of the warehouse district.

However, just before the battle-ax swung downward, the minotaur Beast Vassal’s movements quietly came to a halt.

Scarlet thorns stopped it.

Suddenly, countless thorns emerged out of thin air, wrapping around the Beast Vassal and binding its movements.

“I thought I told you, transfer student... Don’t involve yourself where you do not belong.”

The voice came from right beside Yukina. The youthful voice clashed with the haughtiness of its tone. Thin air wavered like a faint ripple, and a petite figure emerged, wearing an extravagant dress.

“Ms. Minamiya...?!”

“Hmph... Cute to think someone could put the Fourth Primogenitor under mind control... Who are you?”

When Natsuki Minamiya posed the question, December smiled without a word. Behind the vampire girl, the only thing that faintly swayed was her Beast Vassal’s shadow.

“Mind...control...,” Yukina said unwittingly. “It couldn’t be...”

A vampire’s body possessed powerful resistance against all manner of sorcery. Kojou had been the only one unaffected by the mind attack of Yume Eguchi, the Witch of the Night and World’s Mightiest Succubus.

On top of that, Kojou was a vampire primogenitor. Even if December was a fellow vampire, it ought to have been impossible for December to seize control of Kojou’s mind.

However, in actuality, Kojou had fallen under her control, as well as his Beast Vassals.

“Do not concern yourself with Kojou Akatsuki’s servants, transfer student. That woman is your opponent.”

Natsuki spoke to the hesitant Yukina. Without a word, Yukina nodded, putting strength into the hands gripping her spear.

December raised her eyebrows. Controlling the scarlet bicorn, she commanded it to attack Yukina and Natsuki. However, before she did, a solemn chant was already trickling out from Yukina’s lips.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee!”

The surface of the silver spear was enveloped in a multilayered magical circle. It was the glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect that could rend any barrier in existence and nullify demonic energy. This transformed and deployed between them and December—not as a blade, but as a wall.

“O divine wolf of the snowdrift, let the echoes of thy thousand howls become a shield and repel this calamity!”

December’s eyes glowed brighter, and a torrent of dense demonic energy flooded into the air. However, Yukina’s wall became a shield of light that wiped the torrent clean.

“Gah... Agh...!”

Kojou exhaled in agony. The two materialized Beast Vassals vanished from sight.

“Senpai...!”

“It seems the mind control has been broken.”

Yukina raced to Kojou’s side as Natsuki spoke in an unmoved tone.

Kojou wiped the sweat off his brow as he asked Natsuki in a broken voice, “What happened with...Takehito...Senga?”

“Unfortunately, he escaped. The Island Guard is in pursuit, but it is meaningless. He is a decoy.”

“Decoy?”

“To draw the Island Guard’s eyes away from the warehouse district here. And the same no doubt goes for your vampire?” Natsuki, sour, glared at December. “I should have realized it sooner.”

December adorably stuck out her tongue and shot her a smile. “You still wanna do this? We’ve achieved our objective, so I think any further fighting is fruitless.”

“Achieved...your objective?”

Kojou felt a chill of fright at December’s odd degree of composure. *Did I make some kind of mistake that can never be undone...?* he wondered, gripped by worry.

That instant, the artificial isle swayed with a tremor.

Kojou and the others were struck by an impact strong enough to leave them unable to stand.

Flames spouted up, illuminating the night sky. Even the warehouses—previously assumed undamaged—were enveloped by an orange flash of light and blown asunder.

“The stockpile warehouses are...”

Kojou looked up, dumbfounded at the sight of the Great Pile’s buildings going up in flames one after another.

The reason for Takehito Senga appearing in a ruined factory removed from the Great Pile, employing the large-scale ritual known as Stone Sentinels, and why December had used her ability so spectacularly before Kojou and Yukina—they were all decoys, misdirection.

“A pyrokineticist...is it?”

Natsuki emotionlessly glanced behind her as she murmured.

At the center of the warehouse district engulfed by flames was a small-statured individual, wearing cutesy clothing. It was an indigo-haired homunculus teenage boy. The flames spewing from both of his hands were setting the remaining warehouses aflame one by one.

The hardest thing about using bombs wasn’t using explosives in and of itself. Rather, it was meticulous emplacement and accurately setting them off with the intended timing. If you prepared a good enough detonation device, you didn’t even need explosives—fertilizer or even powdered wheat was enough.

When investigating and analyzing explosives, the presence of a detonator became a critical lead. Naturally, the Island Guard had no doubt been sweeping inside the food stockpile warehouses for hidden detonation devices.

However, they had found none. It was a Hyper Adapter with pyrotechnic abilities, not a device, that was the explosive that Tartarus Lapse had furnished.

“So he’s the real culprit behind the Keystone Gate terror bombing, too? Small wonder the dangerous substances sensors in the underground parking lot were useless. They don’t call you a wrecking crew for nothing. However...”

Natsuki exhaled in visible admiration. Without fanfare, she shifted the tip of her closed parasol toward December. Golden chains spewed out of thin air,

wrapping around December's entire body.

"...you cannot escape any longer."

Natsuki turned a very frigid gaze toward December. December's body writhed about but could not break free of Natsuki's chains. The homunculus boy with pyrotechnic abilities was caught by identical chains.

For some reason, December, seeing this for herself, smiled sadly.

"Goodness, it cannot be helped. I had hoped to go without injuring Takehito's friend, but..."

Still bound by chains, December turned toward the ear microphone under her helmet and murmured, "Carly, please—"

Before her words were even finished, Kojou caught glimpse of a flash from very far away.

Someone was watching them from the top of a building over a thousand meters away.

"—?!"

Yukina's expression froze over as she looked at Natsuki.

Without a sound, Natsuki's small body danced in the sky, blown into the air.

She's been sniped, Kojou realized. One of December's comrades, an operative of Tartarus Lapse, had shot Natsuki from such a long distance that even Yukina's Spirit Sight had been unable to predict it.

"A...spell round...?!" Natsuki murmured, astonished.

A thick magical energy wall protecting her entire body had been smashed into transparent fragments, vanishing. The round, instilled with vast magical energy, had penetrated Natsuki's protective shell.

"Natsuki?!"

"Ms. Minamiya!"

Natsuki's body rolled on the ground. Kojou's hands shook as he picked her up. Yukina held out her spear to shield both of them and glared at December.

The top of Natsuki's dress was ripped to tatters, leaving Natsuki's wounded chest exposed to plain view.

Deep cracks ran across inorganic flesh, reminiscent of a doll's. In place of blood, what trickled out were fragments of tapered ivory. Natsuki's body in the world on "that" side was not one of flesh and blood. It was an avatar animated with magical energy.

However, Natsuki's body, bearing a deep wound sufficient to kill a normal person instantly, did not budge an inch.

"Hit confirmed. Prepare next round—"

December called out to her sniper comrade.

The golden chains binding her had already slackened, allowing her to fall to the ground. With the caster, Natsuki, no longer conscious, the chains had lost their magical energy.

"I will ask you again, Kojou Akatsuki. Won't you join us?"

December looked down at Kojou. Her question had been voiced frailly, almost like a prayer.

That instant, the Tartarus Lapse sniper was preparing her rifle. If he refused December's invitation, the next round would doubtlessly come for Kojou and Yukina.

Even so, Kojou bluntly shook his head.

"Why?" December asked, narrowing her eyes forlornly. "If you knew Tartarus Lapse's objective, I'm sure you'd understand."

"I don't know what your reason is, but I don't intend to help out a bunch of murderers."

"Is that so? How unfortunate..."

December's shoulders sank with a sigh. Her lips, meant to give the order to snipe, quivered.

But before that, Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal. The enormous body of the servant, swaying like a mirage, swelled up to Kojou's rear.

“C’mon over, Natra Cinereus—!”

“Carly.....?!” Heedless, December tried to order the snipe, when her breath caught a little.

Kojou’s summoned Beast Vassal was a huge, illusion-like, shelled beast that spewed mist from its entire body. The dense mist, infused with demonic energy, blotted out the sight of Kojou and the others in the blink of an eye.

Accurate fire was impossible under those conditions no matter how good the sniper was.

“Ah... A smokescreen of mist... As expected of the boy she chose, I suppose...”

Sensing Kojou and the others’ presences growing distant, December gave up pursuit with a sunny smile.

The power of the Beast Vassal of Mist had extinguished the fires in the warehouse district as well. The vast majority of the foodstuffs stockpiled there had surely been already burned away. Tartarus Lapse’s objective had been achieved.

“We’re pulling out, Logi, Carly. We’re ready for the Roses,” December stated to her comrades.

For but a single moment, she turned back, gazing at Itogami Island’s nighttime landscape.

No one was likely to ever see that scenery again. That fact left her feeling just a tiny bit sentimental.

Nonetheless, their plan would not cease.

The Roses would awaken—and then no one could halt Itogami City’s destruction.



CHAPTER THREE
IN HER SIGHTS

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1

The morning sun illuminated the sea's surface, shining upon the hull of a tilting ship.

Sayaka Kirasaka and Shio Hikawa were sitting on a corner of the deck, each wordlessly gazing out at the sea. Dozens of other ship passengers were also assembled on the deck.

The combined freight and passenger ship upon which Sayaka and the others were aboard had collided with a freighter right around a full day earlier. It was an unfortunate accident, a combination of the sudden onset of fog, radar trouble, and carelessness by the helmsman.

Fortunately, no one had been injured, and the hulls had not sustained fatal damage either, but both ships had lost their ability to sail. The internal flooding was pretty bad, too. As a result, the passengers had ended up on top of a tilted deck to spend an anxious night.

"I brought some freshly made *onigiri*."

Yui Haba had come back from the ship's cafeteria with enough food to feed four. Following behind her with a tottering, unsteady-looking gait was Glenda. She carried a steaming kettle and paper cups for multiple people in both her arms.

"Ta-daa!"

"Ah, such a good girl, Glenda. Thank you, too, Yui."

Shio took the kettle from Glenda and gave her head a gentle pat. Shio somehow gave off an unsociable image, but surprisingly, she was quite attentive to children and her junior student. She was probably the type to fawn over pets when no one was looking.

“Hey, Kirasaka. Thank Yuiri and Glenda and have a bite.”

“Th-thank you... Wait, what are you talking so high and mighty for?!”

Sayaka felt an exasperated twinge as she glared at Shio while taking her ration of food.

The simple menu consisted of only hand-pressed and pickled food plus smoked mango, but with the situation being what it was, she couldn't complain.

The emergency stores aboard the ship probably weren't that plentiful.

“They said search and rescue would be coming tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. The emergency stocks of food and drinks will be just enough, it seems.”

Yuri poured tea into the paper cups as she conveyed to Sayaka and Shio the information she'd obtained.

Shio seemed a little surprised. She stopped eating and looked up at Yuri.

“Tomorrow afternoon? That's an awful long time, isn't it...?”

“Apparently, there are around thirty other ships unable to sail near here, so search and rescue can't keep up.”

“Thirty ships...”

Shio uttered an “Mm” as she touched her own lips. Shio and Sayaka had confirmed eight other ships adrift, and that was just within their visual range.

The causes of their going adrift varied: engine trouble, colliding with obstacles, and so forth. All incidents occurred without warning and without any visible trace of sabotage. However, there were just too many incidents to pass them off as mere coincidence. Given the circumstances, maritime trade with Itogami Island had to be pretty much completely paralyzed.

“You borrowed the ship's radio, right? Did the Lion King Agency say anything?” Yuri asked Shio.

“They said they're still investigating the cause. But apparently, there's been assassinations of important people on Itogami Island. The chance of it being sorcerous terrorism is pretty high.”

The information was vague, but clearly, the Gigafloat Management

Corporation and Itogami Island police had fallen into a state of confusion. Thanks to that, apparently even Lion King Agency HQ couldn't get its hands on precise intel.

"Sorcerous terrorism, huh...?"

A worried look came over Yui as she turned toward Itogami Island.

"There's no way this incident isn't connected. Should we really be sitting in a place like this?"

"Right or wrong, if the ship won't move, there's not much we can do..."

Shio gave a frail sigh.

"What do you think, Kirasaka?"

"Mm? This smoked mango is really delicious... Is there any more?"

To Shio, posing the question in a sober tone, Sayaka gave a laid-back reply, acting like she was off somewhere in the sky above. Glenda, likewise stuffing her cheeks with mango, agreed with a "Dah!" and nodded.

"Who said we were talking about food?!" Shio shouted, unwittingly projecting an antagonistic aura.



“Ah, yes, yes. This incident is probably someone’s ritual spell attack, right?”

Sayaka grudgingly lifted her face. Spread atop her knees was an open notebook with methodical handwriting and fine mathematical formulas densely written upon it. As she conducted her calculations, she glanced at a stout military wristwatch and an electric compass for reading precise directions.

“I think it’s pretty much beyond doubt an Eight Trigrams Formation, but the numbers just don’t add up. Even if you placed the *taijitu* on Itogami Island, impeding approach to the island, the gate in this part of the sea should be open. But with the location of the Liu Yi, the Six Detachments, in this time zone, that should be impossible, so...” Sayaka exhaled with clear chagrin. “This would be a lot easier if we at least knew the practitioner’s school.”

Shio stared at the side of her face in what seemed like a daze. “Don’t tell me you plan on breaking the enemy’s ritual from inside? Kirasaka, you’ve been doing the calculations all by yourself...?”

“Yes, and? I mean, a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency caught by an enemy’s spell can’t just sit around and get stomped on, can she?” Sayaka shrugged, speaking like it was no big deal.

Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency were specialists in ritual spells and assassination. Naturally, feng shui was among the skills drilled into them. If, in spite of that, she spent two days being a punching bag for an enemy’s attack spell, she’d become a laughingstock.

“Besides, Kojou Akatsuki and Yukina are on Itogami Island. If we leave it to those two, it’s guaranteed they’ll poke their noses into the incident and do something reckless...”

Sayaka murmured in a tone infused with a whiff of urgency. The current situation, not being able to go to Yukina’s rescue no matter how much she wanted to, no doubt burned at her.

Yui, who’d been listening in silence, looked sidelong at Shio and said, “...We owe Kojou and Yukii, too, don’t we?”

She seemed to be urging Shio to cooperate with what Sayaka was doing.

“Besides, Shio, Kojou’s father is still in the hospital.”

“G-Gajou Akatsuki has nothing to do with this!”

“Even though he got hurt protecting you, Shio?”

“U...gh...!” Shio coughed. When Yuri pointed out the painful truth, a bit of Shio’s food got stuck in her throat.

In the incident at Kannawa Lake practically the day before, Kojou Akatsuki’s father had saved her life several times over. In the process, Gajou had been wounded and had been taken to a hospital on Itogami Island. Naturally, if Itogami Island was the stage for large-scale sorcerous terrorism, he would also be in danger.

“Hey, maybe the numbers are off because the placement method’s been randomized?” Shio suggested, straightening her posture as she gave Sayaka verbal support.

Sayaka visibly gasped as she looked at Shio.

“You mean like the code changing according to the moon-phase correction? I see now... If that’s the case, I have to redo the calculation from the start before even getting into the Qimen Liu Yi.”

“Well, it’s like Kirasaka said. At this rate, we’ll get dragged down, and the Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency will lose face. I’ll help, too. See, this is how you calculate it.”

With that justification as her preamble, Shio moved to Sayaka’s side.

Even as they openly disputed about every little thing, the two began analyzing the ritual spell attack together. Yuri gazed at the sight of the pair as she grinned pleasantly. After all, Shio and Sayaka were the two most stellar Shamanic War Dancer candidates of their generation. Nothing was more reassuring in their situation than the two combining their strengths.

“But assuming we do decipher the Eight Trigrams Formation, what do we do next?” Shio asked while they continued the complex calculations without a pause.

An Eight Trigrams Formation constructed via feng shui was a proverbial ritual

spell labyrinth. Using the energy flows of the Earth, its barriers were stout and complex, but if one could decode the ritual, it wasn't hard at all to find a way to slip through. The real problem was that they were in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

"From this ritual, I'm imagining a barrier enveloping Itogami Island, the type that changes according to the time of day. Even if we decode the Eight Trigrams Formation and find a way to get to Itogami Island, after a certain amount of time, the formation will change, and the escape route will be cut off. We'll have to find a way through it somehow before that—"

"Yeah, that's the problem." Sayaka tapered her lips as she twirled a lead pencil around in her hand. "Hmm... I think we could use our authority from the Lion King Agency to commandeer a lifeboat from this ship, but a motorboat isn't fast enough to make it in time until the next change in the formation's shape..."

"I suppose not. I'm worried it's out of the boat's range anyway."

For once, Shio had no counterargument to Sayaka's point of view.

An Eight Trigrams Formation developed for military use changed formations in random patterns—and at a rapid pace at that. It was highly likely that a lifeboat aboard the combined freight and passenger ship would be unable to cope with those changes. Sayaka and Shio clutched their heads at that fact when— "Um... Can I have a moment?"

—Yui raised a hand.

Sayaka and Shio stared at her dubiously. Yui was a Sword Shaman who specialized in direct combat versus demons; large-scale ritual spells such as those employed with feng shui were outside her specialty.

It was probably her own awareness of that fact that made Yui's gaze wander, seeming somewhat lacking in confidence as she said, "Well, I can think of one way to travel a long distance faster than a boat could..."

These words spoken, she shifted her eyes right beside her, where a girl with long, silver hair was sitting.

"...Dah?"

Perhaps noticing that she was suddenly the center of attention, Glenda, cheeks stretched from the *onigiri* she'd stuffed in her mouth, inclined her head with a visibly mystified look.

2

A giant television screen filling up an entire wall displayed the scorched state of the warehouse district. It was an image from the site of the terror bombing that took place at Itogami Island's Great Pile the night before.

The fires caused by the explosion spread, fanned by powerful winds at the time, and even with the passing of the night, it didn't feel like things had yet come under control.

The Gigafloat Management Corporation estimated that the food lost to the current sorcerous terrorism amounted to sixty days' worth per Itogami City citizen. The losses were said to amount to ten or even twenty billion yen.

"My, my, scorched in quite a spectacular manner."

Nina Adelard voiced irresponsible admiration as she gazed at the broadcast from the site of the fire. She was a beauty of the East not amounting to thirty centimeters tall, a liquid-metal life-form—and self-proclaimed Great Alchemist of Yore. More precisely, one might call her a lesser version of her former self.

"You sure are optimistic about this. Like it's got nothin' to do with you." Exhausted, Kojou glared at Nina.

The mansion in Natsuki Minamiya's possession had a particularly large living room. Carrying with them the body of Natsuki Minamiya that had been wounded—no, damaged—the night before by the Tartarus Lapse sniping attack, Kojou and Yukina remained at the mansion as morning came.

Neither Kojou nor Yukina had slept a wink the night before. With various tasks pressing upon them, such as first aid to Natsuki and contacting the Island Guard and so forth, there had been no time to take a break. Even so, the state of the still-burning warehouse district weighed on their minds, leaving neither in a mood to sleep at that point.

“Regrets over burnt supplies shall resolve nothing now.” Nina seemed to be speaking sarcastically as she bluntly made that assertion to the pair. “However, Tartarus Lapse should have paid finer care to the degree of flames. Had they cooked the frozen meat a trifle better, they would not have earned a grudge to this extent.”

“Ain’t like anyone was gonna thank them for frying the meat along with the warehouses.” Kojou grimaced. “They weren’t having a barbecue.” Then he let out a languid breath. “Because you’re saying weird stuff like that, now I’m getting really hungry...”

“Ah...”

Sitting next to Nina, Kanon Kanase stood up in a minor show of haste.

At that moment, Kanon was dressed in light-blue pajamas. Thanks to Kojou and Yukina having imposed just before she was about to go to bed, she’d probably lost track of the right time to change clothes.

“Sorry, Akatsuki. I shall prepare breakfast at once.”

“Ah... That’s not what I meant, Kanase. I didn’t say it to make you do that.”

Kojou tried to call Kanon back as she hurried to the kitchen. Even if she was a houseguest at Natsuki’s place, Kanon was unrelated to the incident, so making her prepare breakfast on top of interfering with her restful sleep naturally tugged on his conscience.

However, Kanon simply smiled and shook her head before proceeding on her way in silence.

“I’d like to help you with that.”

“Yeah, wait. I’ll go, too.”

Speaking those words, Yukina and Kojou seemed set to go after Kanon, but Nina stopped them.

“Wait, wait. ’Tis fine, let Kanon do as she pleases. Allowing her to cook shall surely set some of her worries at ease. Besides, Kanon shall be delighted to eat with both of you. After all, neither Natsuki nor I can grasp the taste of human food.”

“I see... Come to think of it, both your bodies are...”

As Nina smiled at her own expense, Kojou returned the glance, albeit stiffly.

Nina was a metal life-form. Even if it was possible to bring food into her body via transmutation, she had no idea how that cooking tasted. It must have been the same for Natsuki.

Natsuki’s real flesh-and-blood body continued to sleep inside her own dream, the place that had been dubbed the Prison Barrier. The Natsuki in the real world was an offshoot she animated through the use of magical energy.

He understood the logic of it, but the shock of seeing it with his own eyes was great nonetheless. Natsuki’s body, freshly destroyed by a direct hit from a spell round, had been an inorganic doll.

“I wonder if Ms. Minamiya is safe and sound...,” said Yukina, consumed with worry.

Neither Kojou nor Yukina possessed any means of healing Natsuki. The only ones who had actually examined Natsuki’s damaged body were Nina and Astarte. In the first place, neither could repair magical avatars, and Natsuki would probably be ticked off if they’d been staring at her in such a wounded state.

“Well, she herself is likely unharmed. After all, it is no small thing to wound the true body of the Witch of the Void while she is held captive in her own dream,” Nina reassured them, albeit bluntly.

“That said, to think she could turn a doll into a magical avatar in that state. No doubt it shall take a fair amount of time until she is able to move within the real world again. The shock of her avatar being destroyed was likely conveyed to her as well.”

“Guess that figures...” Kojou’s mood was gloomy as he nodded.

To Natsuki, that avatar doll was probably like a musician’s favorite instrument—at least, that was how he envisioned it. To have one’s instrument break mid-performance delivered proportional damage to the performer. Of course, so long as the instrument remained broken, the musician could not play it, even if the musician was unharmed themselves; nor was it something that could be

immediately replaced.

“Can’t you do something with your own power? You’re the Great Alchemist of Yore, right?”

“Simply repairing the avatar is a trifling matter,” Nina readily replied.

To her, able to freely manipulate matter at an atomic level, there was no way she couldn’t restore a broken doll to its original state.

“Regardless, repairing it would be meaningless. Even if one sews up the wound of a human being, that does not mean they can immediately move the same as before. ’Tis a similar thing. Just like severed arteries and nerves must be mended, it must be Natsuki’s own magical energy that courses through it, and that shall take time.”

“Meaning that stuff in this world just ain’t that convenient, huh?”

Visibly dejected, Kojou slumped against the sofa.

Nina nodded her head in agreement.

“Though spellcraft and alchemy are things to be proud of,” she said, “they cannot violate the principles of the world. In that sense, it is no different than science. ’Tis truly an inconvenient thing.”

“Well, I get that... To be honest, I’m just shocked...”

He hadn’t intended to underestimate Tartarus Lapse, but with Natsuki there, he figured they’d scrape by—a notion in his mind with no basis in fact. He’d relied on her for everything. He felt like Tartarus Lapse had thrust his softness into his own face.

“I apologize... This is because I did not stop the sniping attack...”

Yukina remained downcast as she murmured in a small voice. Though she possessed Spirit Sight—which peered an instant into the future—she had been unable to save Natsuki, which surely made her feel responsible.

“The Spirit Sight of a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, yes?” Nina raised her eyebrows as if remembering a past piece of interest. “However, even if one can peer an instant into the future, is it not ineffective against what you cannot see with the naked eye? To begin with, it is impossible to strike down a bullet

flying at over twice the speed of sound from a place over a kilometer away. Even for you.”

“But...” Yukina bit her lip, unable to retort.

A Sword Shaman could evade a bullet from a normal rifle with ease. Even if she could not see the bullet, her instantaneous vision of where the bullet would land allowed her to estimate its arc.

However, Tartarus Lapse had employed an anti-materiel rifle for ultra-long-range sniping. Furthermore, the bullet used was a spell round. Just as Nina had pointed out, Yukina bore no responsibility for Natsuki’s wounds. There was nothing she could have done. Still, from Yukina’s point of view, having her own limits as a Sword Shaman thrust into her face was no real consolation.

“Well, truly, Tartarus Lapse was correct to snipe Natsuki straightaway. Natsuki, employing teleportation, is something of a sniper’s mortal enemy.” Nina snorted, displaying her admiration.

Even if the person was hidden in a place several kilometers removed, Natsuki could cross that distance in the blink of an eye. To a sniper, there was no more formidable foe. Therefore, Tartarus Lapse had aimed at Natsuki, inflicting maximum damage to remove her before Kojou and the others realized the sniper was even there.

“I guess so... This ain’t good...”

Kojou, too, realized the gravity of the situation. With Natsuki unable to engage in combat, they had no way to stop Tartarus Lapse’s sniping. Even Kojou, supposedly immortal, would need a fair amount of time to revive if he was gravely wounded, like if half his body was blown away. Furthermore, with Yukina unable to evade even with her Spirit Sight, she and Kojou had no means left with which to resist.

“In the first place, against terrorist opponents, there is no hope of victory if one loses the initiative. It would take engaging from your side, or at minimum, maneuvering ahead of them and lying in ambush.”

“Easier said than done, though...”

The advice and knowing look Nina gave annoyed Kojou as he stared her

down. It was just then that the living room door opened, and the other guest of the Minamiya household emerged.

This was a petite homunculus with indigo hair—Astarte. Perhaps because she was attending to the damaged Natsuki, she wore not her usual maid outfit, but pink nurse's attire instead.

"Hey, Astarte. How's Natsuki doing? Is she all right? She didn't tell you anything, did she? In a case like this, I'd take anything..."

Kojou poured faint hope into his barrage of questions.

Astarte's expression remained neutral as she inclined her head slightly and said, "As the search parameters are unclear, I am unable to answer."

"R-right... Sorry."

Implication didn't work well on her. Somehow, the very Astarte-like reply left Kojou feeling apologetic.

In his place, it was Yukina who continued the questions.

"Did Ms. Minamiya leave you with any kind of instructions?"

"A single result fits that parameter. She requested that I investigate the Roses."

"...The Roses?"

"Affirmative. She said, 'Investigate the Roses of Tartarus.'"

Kojou and Yukina met each other's faces with conflicted looks. Neither recognized the term. *But judging from how the words come off, it's probably connected to Tartarus Lapse*, Kojou thought. Clinging to hope, he shifted his gaze Nina's way, but she merely shook her head, apparently knowing nothing of it.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

As Kojou and Yukina mulled over the true nature of these mysterious Roses, Kanon returned, dressed in an apron. She'd finished making breakfast. The lovely scent of fresh-baked bread was wafting in from the dining hall.

"Ah. Thanks, Kanase."

“Sorry we didn’t lend a hand. I’m sure it will be quite a feast.”

Kojou and Yukina stood up, seemingly seduced by the scent of food. Seeing Kojou like that, Kanon looked up and smiled with delight as she said, “Please eat as much as you like. After all, no one knows how long the remaining food on this island will last.”

“.....”

Well, that was morbid, Kojou thought, grimacing.

3

A light morning haze hung in the air as Asagi Aiba, wearing her school uniform, lazily climbed a hilly road.

She yawned a great “*Fwah*” as she wiped moisture from the corners of her eyes. Thanks to the Island Guard server repair work having strayed until late in the night, she’d had almost no sleep the night before.

“If you’re gonna cancel school, get in touch with people faster, would you? I got up early for nothing.”

Irritated, Asagi fired off complaints at the smartphone resting in her hand. In response to the terror bombing occurring in Island East, all public schools within Itogami City had temporarily suspended classes. Saikai Academy, attended by Asagi and her classmates, was no exception.

Having long left her house, Asagi didn’t get the news until she arrived at the nearest train station. *If it was going to be like this, I should have just skipped classes to start with*, thought Asagi with a modest amount of regret.

“Keh-keh, looks like those teachers are pretty confused themselves.”

Coursing out from the smartphone’s speaker was the echo of a synthetic yet oddly humanlike voice. This was the voice of the avatar of the five supercomputers that administered the entirety of Itogami Island—the AI that Asagi had dubbed Mogwai.

“Yeah, really. Well, in this situation, it’s no surprise...”

Asagi glanced sidelong at the stiff-faced policemen standing at this and that intersection, shrugging a bit.

Even armed Island Guard personnel had been positioned at monorail stations and bus stops. However, the security network of surveillance cameras and sensors stretching all over Itogami Island made such primitive security and patrol work largely meaningless.

The fact that police were standing in such conspicuous places was less a countermeasure against terrorism than to ward off a citizen riot. On top of the supply of foodstuffs from beyond the island being cut, even the Great Pile had been destroyed. Worry and distrust among the citizenry was, if anything, quite natural.

“So should you really be walkin’ around like that, li’l miss?”

Asagi shot Mogwai a casual smile in response to his sarcastic-sounding question.

“No problem, right? The Island Guard seems to have its reserve guardsmen and even demon mercenaries on full mobilization, searching around for the culprits. We have the island’s surveillance network back, so that Tartar-whatever bunch won’t be able to move very freely.”

“Lot of guts for someone who almost got killed a little ways back.”

“It’s not like they were targeting me specifically.”

When Mogwai raised an exasperated voice, Asagi retorted with a firm expression.

Certainly, the car bomb the day before had shocked her. But Asagi couldn’t think of any reason she’d be targeted by a terror organization. It was more natural to think she’d just happened to come across the site of an indiscriminate terror attack. Unlucky coincidences like that wouldn’t keep happening again and again—such thoughts put her firmly at ease.

“Well, I’ll just see Motoki’s face and go right back home. Kojou’s probably thinking about him, too, y’know,” Asagi said, curving her way onto a dreary street.

Yaze's father, wrapped up in the terror bombing at Keystone Gate, was still listed as missing. Half a day had already passed since the incident had occurred; there was already little hope of finding him alive. Though Asagi was worried about the progress of the rescue work, she was even more worried about Yaze's state of mind. They'd known each other for ages through thick and thin before even entering elementary school. He felt closer to an unreliable older brother than any mere friend, and she knew Yaze's personality through and through.

He had to be incredibly depressed and withdrawn all by himself. As much as he behaved frivolously, he could sink into some very dark short-term funks. *In this situation, I can't do much to console him, but I should at least go see his face*, she thought as she headed to Yaze's boarding house.

It was then the smartphone in Asagi's hand shook with a minute *buzz*. Mogwai arbitrarily informed Asagi of the contents before she could even check the screen.

"It's a message, li'l miss. From my bro Kojou."

"From Kojou? What'd he say...?"

Without her intending it, Asagi's voice leaped. It was very rare for Kojou to get in touch so early in the morning.

"He wants you to look up the Roses of Tartarus."

"—That idiot, what does he think I am? With Itogami Island in this state, he should spare a little more consideration for how *I'm* doing..."

"Keh-keh... It's soooo bad being relied on, li'l miss."

"Oh, shut up!"

The smartphone cracked under Asagi's grip as she shouted.

"More importantly, do you know something about it? The Roses of Tartarus?"

"Who knows... I tried searching just now, but seems there ain't any data related to it on this island."

Mogwai's reply was prompt. Perhaps he'd expected Asagi would ask him that.

"And the Gigafloat Management Corporation archives?"

“Not a peep. I could rummage through outside information agencies, but that’s obviously gonna take some time.”

“Do it anyway. With a name like that, it has to be related to that Demon Sanctuary wrecking crew, right? Why does he always do stupid, dangerous things without so much as a word to me? It pisses me off!”

Asagi sighed, irritated. This was Kojou and Yukina, so there was no doubt in her mind they’d been wrapped up in the Great Pile incident the night before.

“Tell Kojou to wait a bit; I’ll look into it. I’m visiting Motoki’s place right now, and when he has time, he should come, too.”

“Sure thing.”

Asagi ignored Mogwai’s laughing reply and stuffed the smartphone into her uniform’s pocket. Yaze’s boarding house had just come into view.

It was a small, two-story apartment building constructed of wood, a rarity on Itogami Island. A large nuclear family lived on the first floor, and Yaze lived in a room he was renting on the second floor.

A female student wearing a Saikai Academy uniform was standing in front of the apartment building’s steps. When Asagi noticed that, her feet came to a halt.

“That person... I’m pretty sure that’s...” Asagi knit her brows. “Hmm.”

The girl wore glasses and gave off a rather plain air. Asagi had never spoken directly to her but did remember having seen her. It had to be the third-year senior who had begun dating Yaze as a result of his passionate onslaught several months prior.

That senior was standing still in front of the steps, staring at Yaze’s apartment with a neutral expression.

In front of her chest, the girl was hugging a basket filled with fruits. It was the sort of extravagant fruit basket one took when visiting someone who was sick.

“Um...if you’re looking for Motoki’s room, it’s on the second floor, number three.”

Asagi tried addressing the bespectacled girl from behind. She imagined the

girl was in a bind from not actually knowing where Yaze's room was. However, when she looked at Asagi, her eyes seem to waver in fear; she broke into a run as she tried to make her escape. That made Asagi the nervous one.

"Ah, wait... Wait, please! Er... You're Yaze's senior, aren't you?"

Maybe Asagi had gotten through to her, for the girl trying to run away stopped in place. Then she looked at Asagi with an extremely worried look. She had the face of a fainthearted heroine in a romance manga, particularly in a scene where she'd just stumbled upon her boyfriend flirting with another girl.

"Ah, you have it all wrong! I'm just a classmate of Motoki's, just a childhood friend here to see how he's doing. If I'm in the way, I can go home right now!"

Asagi explained rapid-fire to the senior-class girl who was trembling like a small animal. She wouldn't be able to stand it if she got involved in something troublesome because of some kind of weird misunderstanding.

"Um, there's really nothing going on between Motoki and me. I have a boyfriend of my— Well, not quite, but anyway, someone like that."

"....."

The bespectacled girl looked back in silence as Asagi continued her earnest explanation. Then, she held out the fruit basket she was clutching to her breast in front of Asagi. Acting on reflex, Asagi took it without a thought.

"Ah...!"

While Asagi was distracted by the fruit, the girl broke off into a run once more. The scene was over in a second; there was no time to stop her. All Asagi could do was stand in a daze as she watched the girl go, receding in the distance.

"Awww. *She totally misunderstood, didn't she?*" Mogwai laughed with a muffled voice.

"Hey, hold on a...! I'm not at fault here!"

Asagi, standing there completely at a loss, finally sighed deeply.

An old basketball, abandoned and forgotten, gently traced an arc before dropping into the rusted hoop.

In a corner of a seemingly deserted public park, Kojou was practicing free throws over and over in silence. Immersing himself in free throws when hitting some kind of impasse was a trait of Kojou's, a basketball player since elementary school. Even when he became the so-called World's Mightiest Vampire, that hadn't changed.

It was about an hour since he'd devoured the breakfast Kanon had made and had departed from Natsuki's place. At the moment, Kojou and Yukina were waiting for Asagi to reply to the message he'd sent. They couldn't think of anyone they could rely on to look into the Roses of Tartarus besides Asagi.

"It's like there's a...bad whiff in the air. Like calm before a panic breaks out or bloodlust floatin' around."

Finally putting his free throws to rest, Kojou murmured as he washed his sweaty face at a water fountain.

Maybe he was just imagining it, but he saw very few people walking around. Thanks to that, seeing only patrol cars, police vans, and Island Guard armored cars really stood out.

On the other hand, the supermarkets and convenience stores continued normal operations, but somehow, the imbalance seemed eerie. It felt like people stubbornly insisting on living their normal lives was actually pushing society to the brink.

"The fault is mine...," Yukina weakly replied as she tendered a towel in front of Kojou.

Her abrupt words made him feel a little constrained. He wondered if the flow of water had caused him to mishear her.

"Huh?"

"If I had only protected the Great Pile, this would not be..."

"No, no, no... Why you gotta talk like that? Protecting the warehouses wasn't your job, Himeragi."

“I am a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, and yet...”

Yukina was deeply dejected. Kojou had thought that she'd said very few words since the night before; apparently, her fretting about this was the reason why.

From what he'd heard, the main mission of the Lion King Agency was to stop large-scale sorcerous disasters and sorcerous terrorism. It was because the Fourth Primogenitor was viewed as a danger on par with international terrorist organizations and large-scale natural disasters that Yukina had been dispatched to observe Kojou.

Seeing Yukina like that, not having been able to stop the Great Pile from being blown up had been a far more shocking ordeal to her than Kojou had thought. But...

“Apprentice Sword Shaman, right?”

Kojou corrected her as he grasped both of Yukina's cheeks. He proceeded to pull both outward, forcing her face into a smile.

“Um... Senpai...?”

A perplexed look came over Yukina, but she left Kojou's hands where they were.

Even surprised like this, Yukina was indeed a pretty girl. At the very least, Kojou thought this was better than seeing her brood over things all by herself.

“A while back, I told you about me getting beat in a basketball match, right?”

“Yes...”

Kojou's abrupt murmur made Yukina nod with a meek look.

Determined to win the match on his own, he'd caused misfortune for teammate and opponent alike. The feeling Yukina harbored that moment greatly resembled Kojou's gloom from back then.

“I thought about that when December's Beast Vassal took me over.”

“Eh...?”

“Even after Natsuki told me to butt out, I got a big head from being called this

World's Mightiest Vampire and thought I could save the island all by myself. And look at us now."

"But...that's..."

...not your responsibility alone, Yukina was going to say, but she swallowed her words.

There had been nothing Kojou could have done at the time; the same went for Yukina. Even if they'd had a way to know about December's ability beforehand, they had no way to stop the sniping or the explosion.

Even with the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou himself was nothing more than a mere high schooler. And Yukina was Kojou's watcher. Getting a leg up on a wrecking crew that even the Island Guard couldn't stop had been an absurdity from the start.

Yukina's face softened. She'd no doubt finally realized it for herself.

"Senpai...but..."

"Yeah, I get it. I don't know about this Demon Sanctuary wrecking crew thing, but if we used our powers however we wanted, we'd end up the same as Tartarus Lapse."

Kojou said that as he let go of Yukina's cheeks. Shifting his gaze toward the black smoke plume rising from the warehouse district, Kojou pressed his right fist against his left palm.

Somewhere in his heart, Kojou's pride had dictated that he could stop Tartarus Lapse. Yukina was motivated by her sense of duty as a Sword Shaman. Still, it hadn't been enough.

December had a power that let her control even the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor. She and her people had hurt Natsuki right before Kojou's and Yukina's eyes. From that point on, it was no longer a war between Tartarus Lapse and Itogami Island.

December and her comrades had picked a personal fight with Kojou and Yukina. Thus, they *had* to stop Tartarus Lapse. The two now had a reason to go and stop them.

“Gotta do unto others as they do unto you, right?”

“Yes!”

Yukina nodded with a powerful glint in her eyes. She looked like a loyal puppy staring at her owner.

Seeing Yukina dead serious with that easy-to-read expression brought a small, wry smile over Kojou.

“—All that said, the problem is December’s Beast Vassal. What the hell is that power anyway...?”

With a bitter look, Kojou recalled the silhouette of the Beast Vassal that December had summoned the night before.

They’d thought that Takehito Senga’s feng shui was the greatest menace Tartarus Lapse posed, but they’d been wrong. The sniper named Carly and the homunculus controlling pyrokinesis were plenty dangerous opponents by themselves; however, to Kojou, the truly difficult foe was none other than December’s Beast Vassal.

A Beast Vassal that could control other Beast Vassals; in one sense, that made it the mightiest servant of all.

Above all else, she could control even the Beast Vassals of Kojou, the Fourth Primogenitor. If he didn’t do something about that, he’d have no chance of beating her no matter how many times they fought. However...

“—I have a...hunch about just what that Beast Vassal is... And also, a way to defend against Miss December’s attack.”

For some reason, Yukina appeared melancholy, but she spoke crisply nonetheless.

Kojou looked at Yukina in surprise. “You do?”

“Yes. But it is already proven that Snowdrift Wolf can cancel her mind control. Knowing this, I must wonder if Miss December will politely engage you in frontal combat again, senpai...”

“That so...? I suppose you’re right...”

December's objective was the destruction of Itogami Island. She had no reason to go out of her way to fight Kojou.

"But if that's true, that means she has a way to destroy Itogami Island without using my Beast Vassals?"

"Eh? Ah yes... It would mean that, wouldn't it...?"

Seemingly caught off guard, Yukina sank into thought.

Each of the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals possessed enough destructive power to burn away a city or two with ease. If December wanted to control another's Beast Vassals and use them to destroy Itogami Island, the quickest and surest way was to control Kojou's. And yet, she had made no real effort to use Kojou in that fashion to date.

"Meaning that they have some other way they can destroy the island?"

"I do not know," said Yukina, shaking her head. "The Lion King Agency is supposedly reinvestigating the case of the Iroise Demon Sanctuary's destruction, but it seems that there are few records remaining..."

"I've gotta say, Himeragi, it's hard to tell if that organization of yours is reliable..."

"I suppose you have a point..."

Yukina clearly felt responsible and lowered her face.

This is rough, Kojou thought, letting out a sigh as he said, "So the only lead we've got left is that phrase, *Roses of Tartarus*..."

At almost the same time Kojou said that, his cell phone vibrated. A text had just arrived.

"Is it from Aiba?" Yukina asked, her expression tinged with anticipation.

However, when Kojou gazed at the brief message on the screen, he shrugged at her.

"Yeah, she says she's trying to look into the Roses, but it's gonna take a while. Also, she wants us to come along while she goes and visits Yaze's place."

"Is Yaze's father—?"

“They still haven’t said anything on the news. For now, let’s go and see, I guess?”

“Yes.”

Seeing Yukina nod, Kojou shifted his gaze in the direction of the station.

That instant, when the corner of his gaze caught sight of a strange silhouette, Kojou’s breath caught, and he adopted a guarded stance.

A small-statured teenage boy with an androgynous figure had suddenly appeared, seemingly melting out of midair.

Just like Astarte, his hair was indigo, a color impossible in the natural world. This demonstrated that he was a homunculus—a product of alchemy and genetic manipulation.

“Sorry, Fourth Primogenitor, but I need you to come with us first.”

His voice had not cracked yet, sounding like a clear, boyish soprano. All around him were shimmers that wavered in the air. He’d used refraction from differences in air temperature to conceal all sight of him.

“You’re...the guy who blew up the warehouse district yesterday...!”

“Logi is fine, Kojou Akatsuki. Our teacher...Takehito Senga, would like a word with both of you.”

The pyrokinetic homunculus made the statement to Kojou in a nearly monotone voice.

“What’s there to talk about—?”

Kojou’s face twisted in anger.

There was no reason to respond to the request for dialogue. If they needed info on Tartarus Lapse, they could just capture the boy calling himself Logi and ask him. Kojou took a step forward to narrow the distance when— “Senpai, don’t!”

It was Yukina who stopped Kojou.

Logi breathed out a *huu*, unmoved as he slowly surveyed the people walking to and fro in the surrounding area. Even if there was less foot traffic than usual,

they were still close to a station. There were certainly pedestrians to be seen.

“I think you understand already, but our sniper is aiming at you. It would be good if stray rounds do not strike innocent people...,” Logi announced. Though his voice was calm and composed, his suggestion was pure extortion.

“Why you...!”

“I understand how you feel, Fourth Primogenitor, but if you prefer we kill each other, we can do that after we talk, yes?”

Logi’s expression did not shift. Kojou audibly gritted his teeth.

“Where do we need to go?” he asked, trying to restrain his emotions.

Logi turned his back toward Kojou and Yukina. He proceeded to walk forward, defenseless.

“You’ll find out soon enough. It is rather humble, so do not expect much for hospitality.”

“I won’t,” Kojou spit under his breath.

5

The building had been quietly constructed in a back alley of Island West. The billboard was stamped with a cartoonish paw print. Senga Pet Clinic—that was the building’s name.

“...An animal hospital?”

Kojou and Yukina, led there by Logi, looked up at the billboard, their feet halting in visible confusion.

It was a very normal veterinary hospital building. The compact building was all pastel colors, and a variety of cute animals made with colored paper were plastered over the window.

“You don’t seriously mean that Takehito Senga is here...?”

“Yes. This is Tartarus Lapse’s safe house.”

Logi replied to Kojou’s half-incredulous question. Written on the entrance was

a sign reading NO EXAMINATIONS TODAY. Without reserve, Logi opened the door and made his way inside.

Though Kojou and Yukina were hesitant, they reluctantly followed him.

The atmosphere in the hospital's waiting room was exactly that of any other animal hospital.

"To think they were lurking in the middle of the city like this..."

Unbelievable, seemed the tone of the murmur Yukina let slip.

A slight whiff of pride wafted around Logi as he looked back and said, "At a hospital, unfamiliar people entering and leaving garners no suspicion, and it's an easy place to gather dangerous chemicals. It has a fair number of social uses, too. Convenient, isn't it?"

"Should you really be bringing us to a place like this?"

Kojou voiced the simple doubt that came to mind. Logi made what looked like a casual shrug.

"Teacher decided, so there."

"Teacher?"

I see, Kojou thought. *If he's a veterinarian who supervises younger vets, calling him Teacher wouldn't be too strange.*

Logi went to the examination room in the back of the building, beckoning Kojou and Yukina to follow.

The cutesy, handwritten logos and posters covering the hospital's interior lent a child-friendly air, making Kojou feel really stupid for being on guard, wondering if it was all a trap.

When Kojou and Yukina arrived at the examination room, a middle-aged man sitting in a plain office chair greeted them. The gray jacket he wore and his long hair made him look like the sensitive artist type.

Noticing the pair had entered the room, the man's eyes narrowed in delight. His face was alive with curiosity, like a man appraising the pupils of an acquaintance.

“Fourth Primogenitor and Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, yes? I thank you for having come all this way.”

The man spoke in a quiet voice. His demeanor, with no ill will evident, threw Kojou off a little.

“You’re...Takehito Senga?”

“That’s right.”

“The one who used feng shui to blockade Itogami Island...”

“Well, you could say that is my job.” Senga replied to Kojou’s rude questioning in an aloof manner without any hint of irritation.

A light-pink curtain right behind Senga swayed. Poking her head out from it was a girl wearing a rather thick, puffy coat. She had a cute, refined face, but there was a foul, emotionless look in her eyes. There was a long scarf wrapped around her neck. She seemed to be around the same age as Logi—mid-teens, thereabout.

On a tray, she presented ice cream cups. She served vanilla and chocolate to Kojou and Yukina respectively, taking the last one for herself.

“Eat.”

“Th-thank you very much.”

Prompted by the girl with the scarf, Yukina spoke politely by reflex.

For his part, a conflicted expression came over Kojou as he looked down at the ice cream offered to him. After all, it had a warning written on the lid in black magic marker that read DECEMBER’S!

“Er, ah, but this is...”

“It is all right. No one minds.”

“R-really?”

Kojou gloomily bounced between two social norms: concern about eating something that belonged to someone else and the rudeness of not eating something offered to him. The development chipped away at his sense of tension.

“Are you so surprised the operatives of Tartarus Lapse are all children?”

Senga waited until the scarf girl left the room before posing the question.

Well sure, said Kojou’s wordless glare at Senga. Setting December, a vampire, aside, Logi and the girl from before were clearly minors. They were both probably younger than Yukina.

Who would think they had any motive to destroy a Demon Sanctuary? But Senga showed Kojou and Yukina a wry, self-deprecating smile.

“This might sound like an excuse, but I have not forced them into Tartarus Lapse in any way. Destroying the Demon Sanctuary is their very own desire.”

“Was it not you who instilled that desire in them...?” Yukina rebuked.

“Taking children who know nothing, nurturing the abilities that make them valuable as terrorists—”

“I do not think you, raised to be a tool of the Lion King Agency, are in any position to criticize.”

“...!!”

Senga’s dispassionate comment made Yukina’s breath catch. As a Sword Shaman candidate, Yukina had repeatedly undergone combat training from a young age; though their circumstances differed like light and shadow, comparing herself to Logi and the others was like looking in the mirror.

Yukina just happened to be scooped up by a special government agency—and Logi and the others by Tartarus Lapse. That was the only difference between them.

They are the same as you are, Sword Shaman. For instance, Logi—he was a military experiment in producing a homunculus pyrokineticist.”

“An experiment...”

Yukina’s face went pale as she looked at Logi.

The Holy Grounds Treaty had granted homunculi the same rights as ordinary demons. Biological alteration for military purposes was beyond doubt a grave breach of the treaty that would be internationally condemned.

“It goes without saying that it was an illegal experiment. When this was exposed, December saved him before he was disposed of. This was in the city that used to be known as the Iroise Demon Sanctuary. The other children—well, their circumstances are all similar.”

“Then, that’s why they want to destroy Itogami Island? Because it’s another Demon Sanctuary...”

“No.” Senga bluntly refuted Kojou’s suspicion.

“Certainly, to them, Demon Sanctuaries are symbols of oppression, but they are not destroying this place out of revenge. Besides, they do not intend to destroy all Demon Sanctuaries.”

“Meaning that there’s a special reason why they singled out Itogami Island as their target?”

“Well, yes, indeed.”

Senga trained a smiling face toward Kojou. He seemed tired and worn.

“That is why I thought I would speak with you, Fourth Primogenitor—I hoped that once you learn the reason why we are destroying Itogami Island, the two of you might cooperate with us.”

“December said the same thing, y’know. Join us.”

Shaking his head with a sigh, Kojou gazed at Senga with a hostile look.

“Ask as many times as you want, the answer’s the same. I don’t intend to lend murderers a hand.”

“Murderers, you say? Well, we certainly are.” Senga laughed out of the blue. “But the same goes for those who constructed Itogami Island. The casualties from the devastation that this island has inflicted shall dwarf the number of humans we have killed to date.”

“Devastation...inflicted by this island...?”

“In truth, the artificial isle known as Itogami Island is an altar for the purpose of resurrecting Cain, the Sinful God.” Senga’s voice was quiet and lacked emotion.

The name of the god spoken so abruptly on Senga's lips left Kojou at a loss for words. Only a few scant days before, he'd nearly been killed by followers of that same sinful god.

Seemingly satisfied by Kojou's reaction, Senga gently cast his eyes downward.

"The designer of Itogami Island—Senra Itogami—desired the resurrection of Cain. The man himself is dead, but even now, those carrying on his ideals remain the nucleus of Itogami Island."

"Then, your assassinations of Gigafloat Management Corporation upper management have been due to—"

"Yes. They are in league with the designer of Itogami Island." Senga nodded in response to Yukina's question. "Their purpose is not the same as the crude terrorists known as the Cleansers. They are seekers of true sorcerous truths that have prepared for the Sinful God's resurrection over a period of decades."

"So you're telling us to believe that wild story without one shred of proof?"

Kojou retorted in a brash manner. However, from his expression, Senga actually seemed mystified as he faced Kojou.

"Surely, you are both aware that the man known as Senra Itogami was willing to employ any means to complete his objectives, no matter how heretical?"

"You mean the relic of Lotharingia's Saint, don't you...?" Kojou's brows contorted inward.

When Itogami Island was designed, Senra Itogami chose the forbidden use of a sacrificial material to resolve the need to shore up the cornerstone's insufficient strength. Thus, the designers had constructed the island with the relic of the Saint usurped from Lotharingia Cathedral as its foundation.

"Did you really think that man would design an artificial Demon Sanctuary with no objective in mind?"

"So what? How's that related to the people living on Itogami Island now...?!" Kojou could barely manage his retort. "If what you say is true, just make it public, dammit! Why do you need to destroy Itogami Island, then?!"

"I'll ask you this. How much do the two of you know about the Iroise Demon

Sanctuary? Did you know that Tartarus Lapse destroyed that city?”

For the first time that Kojou was hearing, anger slipped into Senga’s voice. Kojou and Yukina fell into silence, unable to refute him.

“What you said is just, Fourth Primogenitor. Simply asking people to believe our words is an unreasonable demand. Therefore we, Tartarus Lapse, will prove it by our own hand. Through destroying Demon Sanctuaries, our exploits shall no doubt lend weight to our assertions.”

“So that’s why you’re on a warpath...”

Kojou’s eyes fell to the cup of ice cream he gripped in his hand. The letters spelling the name DECEMBER upon it burned distinctly into his eyes.

“If you knew Tartarus Lapse’s objective, I’m sure you’d understand.” That was what December had told Kojou—and she’d been right.

At the very least, he was forced to recognize that Tartarus Lapse’s actions had a fairly weighty cause behind them. There was no sign that Senga was lying, either.

“It was the same when the Iroise Demon Sanctuary sank six years ago. Even before then, December destroyed a number of other Demon Sanctuaries...with the Tartarus Lapse members who preceded us.”

“Right... December’s a vampire and all...,” Kojou murmured haltingly, as if he’d only just remembered.

Finally, he could truly appreciate why Senga was not Tartarus Lapse’s leader. December might have looked like she was in her mid-teens, but she must be many years older than Senga.

“A vampire...?”

Although, when Senga heard Kojou’s murmur, he knitted his brows.

“You surprise me. You have not realized it yet, Fourth Primogenitor?”

“Realized what?”

“Well, it’s fine. You will know soon enough. More importantly...” He straightened his posture before continuing. “That is all I have to say, but I would

still like to hear your reply, Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Reply?”

“Do you have a mind to cooperate with us?”

“Cooperate, huh?”

Kojou realized that he’d unwittingly broken into a strained smile. It was because Yukina, standing silently at his side, was worriedly watching him.

“Sheesh. Boiled down, it’s the same damn thing—”

Kojou exhaled in visible exasperation. “Senpai?” called Yukina, a perplexed murmur trickling out.

“Exactly what do you mean?” Senga asked as he grimaced.

A plainly dejected expression came over Kojou’s eyes.

“Why do you people have to be all *Let’s put the whole world on our shoulders...*? I’m fed up with it. It’s embarrassing, like I’m having the old me shoved into my face.”

“I do not know what you are trying to say, Fourth Primogenitor.”

Senga’s previously unemotional voice began to be tinged with annoyance.

Kojou curled up the corners of his lips and coolly stared at him. “Do you really think people don’t believe you just because there’s no proof? That’s not it, is it? Isn’t the reason no one trusts you because *you don’t trust anyone*?”

“What...?”

“You said that resurrecting Cain will hurt a bunch of people. If so, wrecking Demon Sanctuaries isn’t what you should be doing. You should be saving the people who’ll become those casualties!”

Kojou’s low voice echoed. Senga’s cheek twitched as if he’d been slapped across the face.

“You’re on your own because you don’t even get something like that!” Kojou continued. “You’re going out of your way to make enemies of the people you should be saving!”

“To be perfectly transparent...we’ve tried that, over and over!”

For the first time, Senga’s voice was ragged.

“But look at where we are as a result. The world hasn’t changed! And the plan to resurrect Cain is the only thing proceeding—”

“Then why didn’t you go lookin’ for help? If you had time to go around smashing Demon Sanctuaries, you should’ve scoured around for people who’d believe you!”

Kojou had only pity for the man.

“A hacker I know told me this. Hackers are the sort of people who find stuff that people want to hide and then expose every last bit of their secrets. If you got help from people like that, there would’ve been other ways! Even now, you —”

“How dare you...!”

Surprisingly, it was not Senga with anger visible on his face, but Logi. A hot wind was blowing toward Kojou and Yukina, heat simmering all around him.

“Logi, stop it.”

Senga held the homunculus boy in check. Perhaps his comrade’s emotional outburst had snapped him back to his own senses. Senga had already discarded his previous irritation.

Then he quietly shook his head, sending a coldhearted gaze Kojou’s way.

“If you are speaking of Asagi Aiba, I am afraid you are too late.”

“Huh...?!”

Kojou’s eyes widened in astonishment. Kojou had brought up the topic of hackers, but Asagi’s name coming out of Senga’s mouth was completely outside his expectations.

“Why do you know about Asagi...?!”

“It couldn’t be...” Yukina trembled. “Calling us here was to keep us from meeting up with Aiba...?!”

“Senga—!!”

The fear that struck Kojou seemed to make all the blood in his body freeze over.

Logi had spoken to them in the public park just before they were about to meet Asagi. It was as if he had appeared before them at exactly the right time to prevent their rendezvous.

He should have suspected it sooner. Why were Carly the sniper and December absent from the site of such an important conversation? Now he understood; they were after Asagi.

Keeping Kojou and Yukina tied up until December and Carly could assassinate Asagi—*that* was Tartarus Lapse's real objective. That was why Senga had gone so far as to put their safe house at risk to bring the pair to that place.

"I will not ask you to forgive me, Fourth Primogenitor."

"Wait!"

A ragged torrent of magical energy reminiscent of a typhoon blew toward Kojou and Yukina. They abruptly realized that a complex magical symbol had appeared on the surface of the examination room's floor.

"Feng shui—!"

"Senpai, please get down!"

It was Yukina who advanced to shield Kojou, who was buffeted by the ritual energy. Drawing her silver spear from the guitar case, she thrust the tip into the floor in the course of a single flash.

The beam of light surging from the tip of the spear's blade rent Senga's magic circle apart.

Its vast magical energy suddenly vanished; the recoil sent Kojou dropping to his knees. Tranquility returned to the examination room as the typhoon of magical energy up to that moment vanished, almost like it was never there.

However, there was no sight of Senga. Logi and the girl in the scarf had vanished, too. They'd abandoned the safe house.

"Asagi...!"

Powerless, Kojou stared at the gently swaying curtain.

6

“I said I’m sorry already, sheesh!”

Asagi fumed while stuffing her cheeks with a fresh mango in a tiny yard surrounded by a home vegetable garden.

Sitting in front of Asagi, wearing a seemingly sulky expression, was Yaze.

The yard in front of his apartment building had a wooden garden table for people to eat outside on days when the weather was nice. Everyone living there was free to make use of the table.

“I never imagined I’d bump into your upperclassman...Hiina, yeah? I tried to prevent her from getting the wrong idea, you know. Ah, sorry, Mrs. Asako. Thank you very much.”

Asagi spoke warm words of thanks to the woman in the apron bringing over some tea.

“It’s fine, Miss Asagi. It’s been a while. Please take your time.”

The mysterious air around the lady made it hard to determine her age. She had a daughter in elementary school, but she didn’t look any older than a student herself. Apparently, she managed the apartment building part-time and did various other jobs for the tenants, but Asagi didn’t know the details. *She might have been the influence on Yaze to like girls older than him, though,* thought Asagi.

It seemed like Yaze purposefully waited until the landlady was out of sight before letting out a large sigh.

“Just wonderin’, why are you eating the fruit that my upperclassman brought for me?”

“Well, you weren’t touching it. But isn’t this kinda like waiting to visit a sick person in the hospital? Not that I’d really know.”

“Is that something you should say while stuffing your face?”

Yaze glared resentfully at Asagi, languidly keeping his cheek pressed to his palm.

“Well, you did come ’cause you were worried about me, so I’ll thank you for that at least.”

“Yes, yes, you should thank me.” Asagi, speaking in a patronizing tone, reached her hand toward the second mango. “So the rescue op for your dad. What’s up with that?”

“Not one damned word. The rescue probably isn’t totally stalled, but right now the Gigafloat Management Corporation probably has its hands full putting the Great Pile back in order.”

“Worried, huh...?”

Even as she sliced the mango with a fruit knife, Asagi appeared conflicted.

“Not really.” Yaze smiled—a blatant bluff—as he shook his head and said, “Not that I care what happens to that guy, but if he dies, there’ll be a bitter war of succession for sure, y’see. If I’m worried, it’s more about that than over him. If this goes bad, there could be a bunch more dead people to come.”

“Wait a... Cut that out. That’s not funny where your family’s concerned, geez.” Asagi’s face grimaced in visible disgust at Yaze’s dark humor. “You’ll be okay, right?”

“Who gets anything from killing little old me?”

“Even if you don’t have any value yourself, you’re the legitimate son, so there’ll be plenty of people who think you’re worth using, right?”

“You sure say the nastiest stuff without batting an eyelash...”

Yaze sounded hurt. If his father died after monopolizing so much wealth and influence, as his son, he couldn’t stay neutral in a succession dispute. Not allowing him to search for his father, perhaps alive and perhaps dead, probably had something to do with political bargaining related to the issue. It was precisely because Yaze was painfully aware of this that he was sulking at his own apartment.

“Besides, I just can’t wrap my head around it. I feel like, if a little terror

bombing like this was enough to kill him, he should've kicked the bucket dozens of times, ages ago."

"Wouldn't know about that, but it's important not to lose hope, right?" Asagi nodded with a knowing look. After all, Akishige Yaze had yet to be confirmed dead. "And hey. The fact that your upperclassman brought you fruit like this means she still has you in her thoughts."

"Wait, wait, why are you always talking like I've already been dumped by her...?!" he refuted, going shrill.

Yaze's assertion that he was dating his upperclassman in the third year was based on his testimony alone; no witnesses who'd actually seen it could be found. Thanks to that, the theory that Yaze had already been dumped was a prominent one, but the man himself stubbornly denied it.

"Geez, both you and Kojou have zero respect for me."

"Come to think of it, Kojou's late, isn't he? I told him to visit. There'll be no melons left for him."

"Do you really have to eat the whole damn basket?!" Yaze wailed, realizing that Asagi had laid her hands on those very melons at some point.

A moment later, Yaze's expression abruptly changed. His gaze shifted behind Asagi as if he'd heard some kind of ominous sound, whereupon he stood up, his face twisting in fear.

"Asagi!!"

"Huh...?!"

Asagi, suddenly sent flying by Yaze, rolled onto the grass. The melon she'd been eating rolled onto the ground; she scowled at the pain in her back.

"Wh...what are you doing, idiot?! You don't have to get *that* angry over me eating one stupid melon—"

"Don't lift your head!"

"Huh...?!"

Yaze yelled at Asagi at virtually the same instant that the fruit on top of the

table blasted apart. Even the basket containing the fruit burst apart, scattering fragments all around.

A flock of seagulls was sent into flight by a discordant ripping sound coming from somewhere far-off.

“Wh-what the...?”

Asagi was dumbfounded as her gaze wandered about. Yaze, still pinning Asagi down to shield her, clicked his tongue in irritation.

“Sniper. Some bastard’s aiming an anti-materiel rifle at us.”

“S-sniper... You don’t mean—I’m the target?!”

Asagi’s voice quivered. The car bomb from the day before floated into the back of her mind. Someone was trying to kill her—it seemed like an idiotic notion, but the reality of it had just sunk in.

“Tch...!”

With Asagi frozen stiff, Yaze yanked her arm.

Suddenly, Asagi felt something whizz right by her ear. The garden table exploded behind her at about the same time she heard the sound of the gunshot.

“Someone’s using incendiary rounds in the middle of a city...?! Are they insane?!”

Blood completely drained from Yaze’s face.

Incendiary rounds were a type of multipurpose ammunition developed for military use. Following impact with the target, the explosives contained within burst into the surrounding area, causing a large amount of damage. It was possible to fire them using sniper rifles, but they were so powerful their use against humans was banned under international law.

However, international regulations held no meaning for Tartarus Lapse, a criminal organization to begin with. The sniper after Asagi’s life was simply that fiendish.

“We have to move, Asagi! Next shot’s incoming!”



Asagi was petrified as Yaze broke into a run, practically dragging her along.

In seeming pursuit of the pair, a new round came flying, smashing the apartment building's fence apart.

7

"No good—can't get through...!"

Depression was consuming Kojou as he pressed the cell phone to his ear.

He'd tried calling over and over, but at this point, he didn't suspect Asagi would answer. An hour had already passed since Logi had met Kojou and Yukina at the park, more than enough time for December and Carly to carry out Asagi's assassination.

"Please calm yourself, senpai! It's all right; we can still make it!"

Yukina squeezed Kojou's fiercely trembling hand as she tried to talk him down.

"Make it?! But December's already..."

"Aiba said she was headed to visit Yaze, yes?"

"Ah..."

Yukina's rational words abruptly snapped Kojou out of it. His constricted range of vision expanded, and the gears in his mind finally began to turn a little.

"I get it. Yaze's boarding house is in Island West... Close to here..."

Kojou and Yukina nodded to each other as they left the animal hospital.

Asagi's action to go there was on a whim. With school suddenly suspended, she hadn't gone home, choosing to intrude on Yaze's boarding house first. There was more than a slight chance that her spontaneous action had caused a delay in December's assassination plan. He didn't think even Tartarus Lapse had the low-rent apartment building Yaze stayed at staked out beforehand.

The downtown residential district was packed with houses, and finding a sniper's perch would take time. They hadn't necessarily pulled the assassination

off yet. It was no time to fall into a panic.

“Shit... If only Natsuki were here at a time like this...”

Kojou unwittingly voiced his lament as he raced through the narrow streets.

Even if they were in the same area, Yaze’s boarding house was still a good two monorail stations away. Even Kojou’s vampirized leg strength couldn’t cross that distance in five minutes—or even ten.

Furthermore, with particularly bad timing, the monorail had just left the nearest station. On an elevated track, the silver-colored train was cruelly passing by above Kojou’s and Yukina’s heads.

At that time of day, it would probably be a ten-minute wait until the next scheduled train. They had no time to wait for the next one.

“Himeragi!”

“Y-yes?”

When Kojou suddenly looked back, Yukina, caught by surprise, came to a halt. As she did, Kojou picked up the small girl without asking first. His unanticipated action left her frozen stiff.

“S-senpai...?!”

“Wrooooooooooagh—!!”

And the next instant, the pair was struck by the bizarre sensation of the sky and soil having swapped places.

With a floaty feeling, as if freed from the laws of gravity, she felt an unpleasant acceleration, like having fallen from a high-up place. Kicking off the the ground, Kojou’s body, with Yukina still in his arms, danced into the city sky above.

“This power is...?!” Yukina murmured in astonishment as she clung to Kojou’s neck.

Having become distanced from the surface of the ground with incredible force, they were gently approaching it once more. It was leaping ability impossible by any normal estimation. Kojou’s entire body was enveloped by a

pitch-black vortex of demonic energy particles.

Kojou knew this demonic energy. It was that of the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassal Number Seven, the intelligent weapon, Kiffa Ater—it was the same demonic energy, with the ability to control gravity, shrouding that enormous sword.

“That Beast Vassal's power... You can control it now?!”

“Control?”

When a surprised Yukina posed that question, Kojou tilted his head, perplexed.

“Er, I don't really get it...but I felt like it was gonna work out!”

“Y-you can't just irresponsibly go about...”

A building's rooftop approached before Yukina's astounded eyes. Still holding her in his arms, Kojou was leaping at distances surpassing thirty meters. A large crater formed in the top of the building from the impact of the landing. The more the Beast Vassal used its demonic energy to protect Kojou's and Yukina's bodies, the more the damage was shifted to the area around them.

They had no time to worry about that, though. Heedless of the concrete smashing apart under his feet, Kojou leaped again. His landing point was the roof of a moving monorail train.

He landed on the monorail with a heavy dent in its aluminum alloy roof. The blow itself sent a heavy creak through the train itself. A single misstep and a great tragedy would have resulted.

Yukina, about to reproach him for that, looked to him as he rested on one knee. Then she exclaimed out of concern, “Senpai...!”

“It's all right... It's all right...”

Kojou heaved with ragged breaths as his eyes glowed with blue flame. The pitch-black particles swirling around his entire body spread out in the form of a pair of misshapen wings. Clearly, he was in no normal state. It was the cost of drawing out the demonic energy of a Beast Vassal while remaining in human form. His body was becoming further like that of a vampire.

“After we’re done saving Asagi, I refuse to do anything this tiring again—not even if you beg me.”

As Yukina blanched, Kojou shot her a frail smile.

The Fourth Primogenitor’s watcher pressed closer to him. Her narrow shoulders trembled, like those of a child fearful of being left behind.

“Yes... I promise...”

“H-Himeragi, calm down... We’re touching in all...kinds of places...”

The soft sensation of her body against his unnerved him enough that he forgot his fatigue.

It was then that a tiny light flashed in the corner of Kojou’s vision. After a second’s delay, a residential yard burst into flames. He could have sworn he faintly heard a gunshot over the sound of the running monorail.

“Senpai, just now—?!”

“That’s from Yaze’s apartment building!”

Grasping that something had happened, Kojou stood, still holding Yukina. It was an anti-material rifle firing from a long range. Tartarus Lapse’s sniper had fired—and Asagi was her target.

“Please, senpai. Go!” Yukina shouted.

“On it!”

With her voice urging him on, Kojou leaped from the monorail’s roof.

Holding back for fear of causing damage to the train, his jump got him not even ten meters before he landed on top of a nearby building and regained his balance.

“One more!”

“Yeah!”

Spreading his black particle wings, Kojou kicked off a second time.

That instant, strength drained from Kojou’s entire body. The demonic energy particles dissipated, and he was struck by gravity reasserting itself.

“—?!”

“Senpai?!”

Having lost his gravity control, his balance was greatly thrown awry. Kojou tumbled back-first to shield Yukina. Protected from the fall, she stood up without injury.

With a quick motion, Yukina drew her spear.

She pointed its silver tip toward the sight of a small-statured girl wearing goggles. Controlling Kojou’s Beast Vassal, nullifying its gravity control power, was her doing.

The leader of Tartarus Lapse stood before them, visibly obstructing their path.

“So you came after all, Kojou Akatsuki. I left it to Takehito to persuade you, but it seems that he failed.”

Just like the first time they’d met, December spoke in a carefree tone.

Kojou wiped off the blood coursing from his forehead and got to his feet.

“Outta my way, December—!”

“Unfortunately, I can’t do that.” December took off her goggles. In their place emerged blue eyes that shined and flickered like fire. “Asagi Aiba cannot be allowed to live. She is simply too dangerous a being to—”

“Don’t try to stop me!”

He didn’t wait for December to finish speaking. That was because he saw Tartarus Lapse’s sniper lining up her shot. The yard in front of Yaze’s apartment building burst into flames.

He didn’t know if Asagi was dead or alive, but from that one attack, he *did* have an accurate read on the sniper’s location.

She was on top of a building with a direct line of sight to Kojou and Yukina, just shy of two kilometers away. If he used one of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals, he could burn away something at that range with ease.

“C’mon over, Regulus Aurum!”

Kojou set his eyes on the under-construction building where the sniper was

stationed as he unleashed his Beast Vassal.

His summoned giant lion scattered lightning all about.

It didn't matter who this sniper named Carly was. Kojou's fully unleashed Beast Vassal would mow her down and annihilate her before she could get her next shot off regardless.

However, December did indeed bar him from doing so. The Beast Vassal she had summoned unleashed its glowing, silver-colored demonic energy, blocking the lightning lion's path.

"Withdraw, Regulus Aurum!"

"Why, you...!!" Kojou growled. Fresh blood flowed from his lips as he bit them.

The lightning lion's movements came to a halt, as if caught by some invisible net. Flickering behind December was a huge Beast Vassal radiating light, almost like some kind of crystal.

A Beast Vassal that controlled the Beast Vassals of others— The demonic energy of the transparent Beast Vassal overcame the lightning lion by force.

However, this did not cause Kojou to hesitate.

Asagi's life was in danger that very moment. If that was how December wanted it, Kojou was left with no choice but to move her aside by force.

"C'mon over—!"

Kojou swung both arms above his head. Unleashing demonic energy so vast that it was off the charts, the impact made the very air warp. Dense demonic energy swirled around, coalescing into new summoned beasts.

"C'mon over, Mesarthim Adamas! Al-Nasl Minium! Al-Meissa Mercury—!"

"Withdraw, Mesarthim Adamas! Al-Nasl Minium! Al-Meissa Mercury!" December shouted over Kojou.

The radiance from the transparent Beast Vassal's entire body increased. It seized full control of the three new Beast Vassals Kojou had called forth.

But the act was reckless, even for her. The demonic energy required to make

multiple Beast Vassals obey simultaneously increased by leaps and bounds. Unable to withstand the strain of the demonic energy, December's flesh was torn asunder. Her lips contorted in pain, and fresh blood coursed from every pore.

December was being tormented by the backlash from Kojou's demonic energy.

"Senpai, you mustn't! Any more than this and—!"

Yukina let out an unfettered shriek. Kojou was being damaged by the demonic energy strain in equal measure. Kojou's flesh was cracking over his entire body, and blood came up with every ragged cough.

Even so, he smiled ferociously. December's ability was not all-powerful. She couldn't control Kojou's Beast Vassals without paying a price in the process. Knowing that was enough.

"—C'mon over, Kiffa Ater!"

Kojou summoned another. A giant sword appeared, its blade over a hundred meters in length. The tip of that blade was turned toward the under-construction building behind December.

Twisting gravity to its own ends, the giant sword shot out parallel to the ground. December's Beast Vassal sustained the blow. The collision of enormous demonic energy caused the ground to quake, forcing buildings to collapse around them one after another.

"Withdraw...my brethren...please...!"

December screamed out. Unable to withstand the backlash of demonic energy, she wobbled and fell to her knees.

However, Kojou had already surpassed his own limits. The possession from December's Beast Vassal affected not only his Beast Vassals, but Kojou, their host and master. The mental damage alone left him far more depleted than she was.

"Please stand back, senpai! I will deal with—"

Yukina poised her silver spear and moved to the fore. Even with the power of

Snowdrift Wolf, it was no easy feat to rend the vortex of explosive demonic energy whipping around December.

Even so, Yukina did not falter, closing the distance with her opponent.

If Kojou's and December's demonic energy continued running rampant, neither would walk away unscathed. The only one who could put a stop to that was Yukina.

“—!!”

But when she was only a few short steps from reaching December, Yukina reflexively leaped back. A geyser of incredible flames burst up before the Sword Shaman's eyes.

It was an incandescent mirage burning thin air itself—a sneak attack using pyrokinesis.

“Mr. Logi...?!”

The indigo-haired homunculus was rushing to December's side. December's Tartarus Lapse comrade had appeared to assist her.

Then, as Yukina stood stiffly, the *bang* of a cruel gunshot rang out.

Kojou was down on both knees as fresh blood burst from his back.

Standing behind Kojou, holding a pistol, was Takehito Senga. He had shot Kojou from behind.

“Takehito Senga—!”

Silver spear poised, Yukina broke into a sprint. In a single burst of motion, she closed the distance and struck the pistol out of his hands.

But before she could do so, Senga had pumped Kojou full of every last bullet remaining.

Kojou had taken six rounds in total, his entire body smeared with blood. Even so, Kojou never tried to stop summoning his Beast Vassals.

“...C'mon over... Sadalmelik Albus! Cor-tau...ri...!”

“Gah...!”

The two Beast Vassals freshly called by Kojou materialized.

December spat out blood as she tried to control them.

Unable to withstand the force of the demonic energy surging out of her, the goggles burst apart, and her helmet fell from her head. The long hair she had kept within unraveled, spreading wildly.

Depending on the refraction of the light, her rainbowlike hair periodically changed color. Golden hair, like billowing flames— “December!”

Logi and Senga both raced to her side.

Kojou and Yukina stared at the spectacle in astonishment.

They were not shocked when they set eyes on December’s unadorned, cherubic face for the first time. It was quite the opposite. Both Kojou and Yukina knew her face. They had seen it many times before...from within Kojou’s own memories.

“...What the...? Why...?” Kojou murmured in a broken voice. Yukina wordlessly bit her lip.

As they gazed at December in shock, her smile looked so sad. It was a smile drenched in loneliness.

“You have done well, December—you’ve done enough.”

Senga held the wounded December in his arms as wooden spell tablets swirled all around them. The markings carved into the spell tablets glowed, forming a simplified magical circle around them. It was a teleportation ritual.

“Time’s up. Raan—activate the Roses!”

Senga directed the command toward his earpiece mic.

Yukina’s expression froze at the echo of the word *Roses*.

However, Senga and the others’ forms grew faint before she could ask what that meant. The teleportation ritual had activated. The group vanished, leaving nothing behind but a faint shimmer, like a ripple in thin air.

“December... What the hell are you...?”

Kojou, his strength seemingly exhausted, collapsed then and there.

Fresh blood flowed out of him with no sign of ceasing, pooling all around him. He bore wounds grave enough that it would be unsurprising for a normal person to have died instantly from them. However, Kojou was beside himself, likely not even noticing what agony he was in.

“Senpai! Please, get ahold of yourself! Senpai...!”

Yukina took the wounded Kojou in her arms as she shouted.

Her voice was heartlessly erased by the malevolent gust of wind, infused with demonic energy.

Once all the Beast Vassals had dissipated, the sky was abnormally silent.

That day, in the face of its impending destruction, the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island was enveloped in frightening tranquility.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE ROSES OF
TARTARUS

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THE ROSES OF TARTARUS

1

Island North was a research and development district with corporate and university facilities built side by side.

This area contained dense clusters of multiple unadorned buildings erected on artificial soil. In one sense, the futuristic district felt the best suited as part of an artificial isle out of everywhere in Itogami Island.

A single girl stood in the corner of a plaza on the highest stratum.

She was a plain-looking student, wearing glasses with her Saikai Academy uniform.

A flock of seagulls was gathered around her.

These were silver seagulls, polished to a brilliant luster—a flock of *shikigami* born from spell scrolls, over two hundred of them, perhaps even three.

All by herself, the girl was controlling this vast number of *shikigami*.

Their purpose was to observe and search for sorcerous criminals.

When the *shikigami*, scattered to every corner of Itogami Island, returned to the girl who controlled them, each and every one reverted to the spell scroll from whence they came. Then they returned to the tome the girl kept spread before her.

When she finally finished stuffing the birds back into the tome, she quietly closed the book.

She proceeded to turn around.

Standing in the direction of her gaze was a young man with a delicate-looking face.

He wore a black Chinese outfit, somehow reminiscent of what a martial artist or mystic of ancient times might wear. Without fanfare, he held a black spear with opposing tips in his hand.

He was Meiga Itogami, escapee from the Prison Barrier— And the oddly shaped spear the young man wielded was named Fangzahn.

“I thought it was about time you made a move, Shizuka.”

Meiga Itogami spoke in a whisper as the only dull-white seagull that had not vanished rested on the fingertips of his left hand. He had wrested the girl’s right to control the *shikigami* away from her.

However, Meiga displayed not even a hint of pride in this feat as he inquired in a gentle tone, “Tartarus Lapse. I do not suppose the Lion King Agency can simply let them go?”

“I suppose not...but I thought, before disposing of them, I wanted to meet with you.”

Koyomi Shizuka—titular head of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency—spoke in a polite tone one might even consider meek.

“Please tell me, Meiga Itogami. What are you thinking? If Tartarus Lapse’s objective was to destroy Itogami Island, surely you would drop everything and move to crush them. Yet, you observe in silence, even as they target the Priestess of Cain, the very deity you worship—”

“You have come to ascertain my true intentions, then?” Meiga asked, amused.

Koyomi nodded slightly. “It is MAR that gave you shelter as a fugitive from the Prison Barrier, correct?”

“Magna Ataraxia Research Incorporated, you say?”

“As an international conglomerate and a financial sponsor of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, even the Island Guard and Attack Mages cannot easily lay a hand upon the group—it is thus that you, despite being a fugitive at large, have gathered various information and have been able to move freely within the island. Am I mistaken?”

“I see... An amusing supposition.” Meiga feigned innocence as a smile came over him. Then he shrugged. “However, it is best not to carelessly speak of this in a public place. I will not be responsible should you and the Lion King Agency make such accusations at the cost of your own reputations.”

“I suppose not. Besides, I do not think a for-profit corporation such as MAR would shelter a fugitive for no benefit to itself,” Koyomi said in a sober, serious tone. “If so, it would mean you have promised something to MAR of commensurate benefit.”

“Commensurate benefit?”

“Yes. A commensurate benefit amounting to a vast amount of profit for them in the future. For example—yes, if you were to expose the entire plan your grandfather left behind, for instance.”

“The revival of Cain the Sinful God...? You overestimate me, Koyomi Shizuka.” He smiled at his own expense. “I do not think the wild delusions of a single sorcerous architect hold such great value. Furthermore, his final masterpiece is being destroyed at the hand of terrorists this very moment.”

“Certainly,” said Koyomi with a nod. “Akishige Yaze, famous friend of Senra Itogami, has been killed in an explosion, and Itogami Island itself is on the verge of being destroyed—I do not think these present circumstances are what you aspired to see.”

“Yes. It is precisely as you say.”

The young man dressed in black replied calmly. In contrast, Koyomi shook her head in refutation.

“However, it is a different matter if even Tartarus Lapse’s actions are part of Senra Itogami’s plan. Perhaps Tartarus Lapse is acting for your benefit without even being aware of it.”

“Employ a group of Demon Sanctuary destroyers, you mean? And why, exactly, would I indulge in such risky methods...?”

“That is what I have come to determine, Meiga Itogami.” Koyomi gently touched her glasses, training a powerful gaze upon the youth. “After all, the Lion King Agency silently consents to your and Akishige Yaze’s plan because it

judges the existence of Cain the Sinful God as a powerful restraint against the Dominions. However, if you are carrying it out without any meaning behind it, we cannot simply stand back and watch.”

“Hmmm.”

“Are you not using Tartarus Lapse to move your own plans forward? The revival of the Sinful God, in other words, the recommencement of the Cleansing —”

“You have become talkative since I’ve last seen you, Shizuka...” Abruptly, the tone of the youth in black...changed. The spear he so bluntly carried gave off an odd-sounding *whoosh* that seemed to slice through the wind. “Allow me to pose a single question of my own. Do you remember Touka Fujisaka?”

“Fujisaka... Miss Touka...”

The name, unexpectedly on Meiga’s tongue, clearly unnerved Koyomi. Her eyes opened wide and wavered, and her lips trembled like those of a frightened child.

“Yes. The previous Koyomi Shizuka—the Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency who stood back and watched your mother die.”

Though his expression had changed little, a hue of powerful emotion came over Meiga’s eyes.

It was the hue of long-suppressed hatred seemingly bubbling to the surface.

“You’re wrong... It was Miss Touka’s mission to...shield the Priestess of the Sacrifice...”

Koyomi retreated half a step. Touka Fujisaka, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency—the girl who, by rights, would have been in Koyomi’s place as one of the Agency’s Three Saints...

Seven years prior, she had infiltrated a village of ritualists worshipping a heretical goddess, losing her life as a result. She had fought them alone, and died, to rescue the young girl who would have been slain as a sacrifice to that goddess.

Immediately after that, Meiga Itogami slaughtered numerous Attack Mages

and was confined in the Prison Barrier as a sorcerous criminal.

“To shield the priestess, you say... Ha.” Meiga laughed, greeting Koyomi’s excuse with visible scorn. “Yes. Come to think of it, Motoki Yaze is shielding the Priestess of Cain—it seems you are rather fond of the lad. Had I killed him back then, this might have turned out somewhat more...amusing... Ha-ha... What a pity.”

“Meiga Itogami, you—!” Koyomi shouted, feeling that she had been backed into a corner.

The world was enveloped in sudden tranquility—broken by a boom. There was the eerie sense of an anomalous interval being jammed into the continuous flow of time. The absolute right of initiative from time that ought never have existed—this was Koyomi Shizuka’s ability, dubbed Paper Noise.

Meiga abruptly realized that his entire body had been riddled with countless bullets.

The impact from the shots sent Meiga’s body flying backward.

In her hand, Koyomi Shizuka was wielding an automatic pistol designed for military use. Meiga was unable to detect when she had ever drawn the weapon.

“As expected of...Paper Noise... I tried to nullify the spiritual energy with Fangzahn, and it hardly mattered...”

Meiga wobbled as he rose back up, clutching the smoldering chest of his Chinese attire.

Meiga Itogami’s black spear—Fangzahn—was a scrapped weapon of the Lion King Agency able to nullify any kind of spiritual or magical energy. So long as the black spear was active, Meiga could not be directly harmed by any kind of attack spell.

But even with Fangzahn’s abilities, he could not stop Paper Noise. Meiga, unable to defend via sorcery, had no defense against the bullets that, rightfully, did not exist until he had already been shot.

“Previously, I warned you... My ability cannot stop you short of killing you,” Koyomi said as she loaded the pistol with fresh ammunition.

Unable to bind Meiga by ritual spell, the only sure means of capturing Meiga was to take his life. She had appeared before Meiga because she had planned to kill him from the start.

“This is why you are the head of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, with even vampire primogenitors giving you a wary eye—”

It was to this Koyomi that Meiga displayed a smile of apparent praise.

“But the Fourth Primogenitor gave me a very important hint. Namely, if you enter my attack range, it is possible to take you down with me.”

“...”

A suspicious expression came over Koyomi as Meiga Itogami raised his right hand toward her. In that hand, he held a small remote control with only a single switch.

It did not look like a lethal weapon, and even if it was a weapon, it was an absolute certainty that Koyomi’s attack was faster. Even though he understood this, Meiga Itogami smiled wryly, as if sure of his impending victory.

“Then, if the time lag of the counterattack is so close that it might as well be zero, it should indeed be possible to break your absolute attack—”

“—!!”

Before Meiga was even finished speaking, Koyomi’s entire body was bathed in light.

Without a sound, she was engulfed in an enormous explosion.

It was a scalding beam of death from the heavens far above. He wondered if Koyomi truly noticed that she’d been struck by an anti-ground laser cannon fired from an orbital track around the Earth— “That was the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s trump card, an anti-ground laser fired from an orbital attack satellite...”

Meiga’s body rolled over the ground, bathed in backwash from the laser-cannon attack. His skin was scorched by hot wind as an enormous hole was gouged in the soil of the artificial isle.

And all sight of Koyomi, there at ground zero, had vanished without a trace.

The anti-ground laser attack's speed was virtually identical to the speed of light. Even Koyomi's absolute-initiative attack ability could not fend off such an onslaught. The remote control Meiga held was the trigger to activate the satellite.

"Farewell, daughter of the accursed tribe... Feel my wrath for robbing me of the only warmth I have ever known..."

Meiga discarded the remote control, its task fulfilled, and slowly rose to his feet. Though his entire body had been peppered with dozens of bullets, he showed no sign of feeling any pain. There was virtually no bleeding from the wounds so cruelly blown open.

Dragging his pitch-black dual spear along, the wounded Meiga walked forward.

Beneath the dazzling, midday sun, a thick darkness fell at his feet. It resembled a shadow of death.

2

Motoki Yaze raggedly breathed out as he hid in the shadow of an apartment building.

The incendiary chemicals scattered around the area had left a burnt stench hovering in the air. Nearly three minutes had already passed since the assassin's first sniping attempt.

During that time, she had fired four times in total. To a sniper, living by the creed of one shot, one kill, the exceptional circumstance could only be called a failure.

Even so, there was no sign of the sniper taking her leave. Even then, frigid bloodlust refined to the point of a needle remained unceasingly trained upon Asagi.

Yaze detected that the source of that bloodlust was on the move.

"The hell, that sniper plans to circle around this way...?!"

Yaze clicked his tongue a little as he predicted the sniper's movement path.

She was leaping from the top of a building under construction to the top of a different building next door.

After that, she jumped to a mansion beside it—with incredible speed far beyond that of a normal person.

She was not beginning to run because her sniping had failed. She was moving to a fresh sniping position, meaning to strike Asagi down, this time for sure.

“Shit, she’s fast... A beast person, then...?!”

Yaze’s murmur was tinged with nervousness.

A fully equipped anti-materiel rifle weighed close to fifteen kilograms. Carrying that and hopping from building to building was not something a normal human being could pull off. However, with a beast person’s strength and agility, such off-the-wall feats were child’s play.

Furthermore, one ought to be able to deal with the drawback of an anti-materiel rifle, immense recoil, making accurate sniping fire possible— “This is bad. At this rate, we won’t be safe here! Gotta run for it!”

“M-Motoki...?”

When Yaze suddenly and violently rose to his feet, Asagi looked back at him with worry visible on her face. *Isn’t hiding here safer?* she seemed to be pleading.

“You said the other side’s on the move... How do you know something like that...?”

“Ah... Well, it’s a little knack that I have. Was pounded into me since I was a little brat.”

“For this sort of thing?”

Asagi looked at Yaze, her expression half belief, half disbelief.

Of course, Yaze was telling her a huge whopper. No “knack” existed that could track a sniper’s movements.

Yaze was using sound to detect the sniper’s movements. He’d dubbed the hyperreactive ability Soundscape, a product of the psychic ability Yaze had

possessed since birth.

Employing that ability, Yaze could accurately grasp the sniper's movements at over a kilometer away. The sniper's position. The direction of the rifle barrel. The sounds of operating the firearm. And even the sniper's breathing and the sound of her beating heart.

The problem was, an anti-materiel rifle's rounds traveled faster than the speed of sound transmitted through the air. The timing of when the bullet was being fired was the one thing Yaze's ability couldn't pinpoint. All Yaze could do was flee from the firing line before the sniper took the shot.

"Anyway, let's run. Staying here is bad. We'll get Mrs. Asako and other people involved."

"What do you mean, run? Down the street? If it's a sniper after us, isn't using the underground roads better?"

"No can do. You haven't forgotten what happened to my dad, have you?"

Yaze's rational retort made Asagi sink into silence.

Itogami Island, an artificial construct, had a netlike array of underground roads for maintenance use. Certainly, if they used those, they would probably escape from the sniper.

But the terrorist group attacking Itogami Island included a serial bomber.

If they had planted bombs on the underground roads, there was no defense against it, for the powerful echoes inside the underground roads rendered Yaze's Soundscape useless.

"Asagi, can you get ahold of the Island Guard?"

"I think that should work... Yeah, it's all right. Transmissions haven't been cut."

Asagi spoke as she looked at the screen on her smartphone. In spite of someone trying to take her life, Asagi was surprisingly calm. She'd always been a calm girl with a good head on her shoulders. Perhaps the various incidents taking place of late had inured her to this level of trouble.

"Then, call 'em straight away. Blasting that damned cannon makes the

sniper's location loud and clear. If the Island Guard comes running, it's game over."

"Hear that, Mogwai?"

"Kinda sorta."

The sarcastic AI spoke up.

"But unfortunately, it's gonna take some time till the Island Guard gets there. They're not really in any position to run over right now."

"Excuse me?! Why the hell not...?! An unregistered demon is on a rampage with an anti-materiel rifle y'know?!" Yaze screeched. "That's a top-priority target, dammit."

However, Mogwai's reply was blunt. *"If you go out onto the main streets, you'll get the picture soon enough."*

"Whaddaya mean...?!"

As Yaze spontaneously talked back, a civilian house's concrete wall shattered. It was an attack from the anti-materiel rifle. With the interceding cover pulverized, Yaze and Asagi's position was exposed for all to see.

"Asagi, run!"

Yaze shouted as he tried to shove her forward. *Is the sniper trying to herd us toward an escape route?* rose a suspicion in the back of his mind, but he had no time to dwell on that.

However, before Asagi had gone thirty meters, her legs stopped as she visibly gawked.

A huge explosion erupted in the road, sending asphalt fragments flying through the air.

"Motoki!"

"A vampire's Beast Vassal...?!"

Realizing the cause of the explosion, Yaze exclaimed in a low, muffled voice. Emerging, seemingly to clog up the road, was an enormous beast enveloped by glimmering demonic energy.

It had to be close to two meters long. It resembled a grizzly bear, but naturally, no such creature was possible from the natural world. It was a mass of dense demonic energy taking solid form—a vampire’s Beast Vassal.

“Losing control in the middle of the city like this?! You’ve gotta be kidding me —?!”

Even Yaze was thrown into confusion by the unexpected situation.

The vampire who was the Beast Vassal’s host had collapsed on the sidewalk. The man had no visible injuries, but the metallic wristlet clasped around his left wrist was giving off a strange red light. And the Beast Vassal was not protecting its host; rather, it simply continued raging around in agony. Control had been completely lost.

Losing control of a summoned Beast Vassal due to physical distress—though not absolutely impossible, the timing for such an accident was unbelievably awful.

They couldn’t run down that road. Judging as much, Yaze curved toward an alley, but...

“Wait, Motoki. That one’s no good, either!”

It was Asagi who hastily urged him to halt.

Yaze soon understood the reason why. There were fine cracks running all along the top of the road. And at the center of those cracks in the ground was an enormous man, his height over three meters tall.

Collapsed in the yard of his own home, the giant was at the center of a vortex of incredible magical energy.

“Gigas Spirit Magic...?!”

Yaze murmured in astonishment. It wasn’t just the vampire behind him and the Gigas. Here and there, demons had begun engaging in abnormal actions as far as his eyes could see.

Beast men were transforming in agony right in the streets. Vampires were losing consciousness after turning into mist. Elves were indiscriminately summoning elemental spirits—one could only think that every registered

demon on Itogami Island was running amok all at once.

“What the hell’s going on, Mogwai?! What happened?!”

Asagi quickly yelled in the direction of her smartphone. The reply from the AI was calm and collected enough to really annoy her.

“Exactly what it looks like. Across virtually all of Itogami City, demons are having their minds jacked and entering a berserk state. The Island Guard is fully mobilized to contain the situation, but if anything, they’re gettin’ overwhelmed.”

“So that’s what you meant when you said they weren’t coming to help us...!” Yaze scratched at his head in annoyance.

Demons within the Sanctuary were all going berserk. He’d never heard of such a situation before, but it was clear this was a man-made phenomenon—the work of the Demon Sanctuary wrecking crew.

The demons living on Itogami Island didn’t exceed even 4 percent of the total population, but that was still over twenty thousand people. If they began rampaging all at once, the Island Guard alone couldn’t hope to deal with it. Not only would there be civilian casualties, but in the worst case, the destruction of the artificial isle itself was a complete possibility.

“What caused the rampage?”

“Who knows. What do you think, li’l miss?”

Mogwai replied to Asagi’s question with a question of his own. Asagi replied instantly, with barely a hint of hesitation.

“A delayed-effect virus.”

“Keh-keh. Agreed.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

Yaze, the only one not grasping the situation, asked as a perplexed expression came over him.

“It’s the demon registration bracelets. They’re embedded with circuits so you can activate simplified magic, like monitoring a demon’s vitals and individual location data.”

“Wait, you’re telling me someone pumped a virus through those circuits?” Yaze gasped and shifted his attention to the vampire still lying on the sidewalk.

They had metal bands on them, demon registration bracelets clasped over their wrists. Red light continued to flash from the slits in the geometric shapes carved into their surface.

“Simplified circuits or not, pretty much all demons wear those things on them twenty-four hours a day. It’d take a powerful catalyst for this kind of ritual. If it’s enough to make ’em fall asleep, no reason you couldn’t do it.”

For some reason, Mogwai said that proudly.

Yaze shook his head, apparently finding it unbelievable.

“So they infected every demon registration bracelet on the island in one go... How?!”

“They used the Island Guard’s network,” Asagi explained, oddly calm.

Yaze looked at her in surprise.

“The Island Guard? ...Come to think of it, yesterday you said there was a ruckus over the Island Guard’s HQ being hacked...”

“So the culprit’s real objective wasn’t taking over the Island Guard’s servers but getting the demon registration bracelets infected with the virus.”

“Even *you* didn’t realize what they were up to...?”

“How could I? By the time I arrived at Island Guard HQ, the enemy’s real program had finished its job and erased itself without a trace, to make sure no one would notice.”

Asagi’s lips tapered in a visible pout.

Mogwai let out a hearty “Keh-keh,” sticking up for Asagi as he said, *“Those bracelets have all kinds of stiff protection around ’em, so normally, you can’t do somethin’ like that, even if you know the theory of how. The culprit’s got some serious skills.”*

“For that matter, there’s no merit to hacking the registration bracelets, so no one does it. Normally,” Asagi added.

“Well, sure. Indiscriminate terrorism is just about all you could use it for...”

Yaze sighed briefly as he ran his eyes over the pathetic state of the island.

The memory capacity a demon registration bracelet came equipped with probably couldn't execute a complicated spell. Making demons lose consciousness and causing them to go berserk was probably the most they could accomplish. But even so, as tools of sorcerous terrorism, it was fair to say that the menace they posed was terrifying.

“Hey, Mogwai. Can't you do something about the virus thingy?”

“No can do. Right now, the bracelets are cut off from the Island Guard network, so there's no physical access route.”

“So with the connection cut, you can't send a vaccine program in either, then?”

“Well, it's not that breaking into bracelets set to independent activity mode ain't possible, but...”

Mogwai's suggestive murmur made Yaze's breath catch slightly.

“Got it... C, then...”

“C, you mean the computer room they dragged me into a while back?”

A dubious expression came over Asagi as she looked at Yaze. Room C—this was a special section built in Keystone Gate's Floor Zero.

Hermetically sealed off from the outside world, the chamber was packed with the five supercomputers that administered Itogami Island, the nervous system to which every computer system on the island was connected. Its stout exterior shell was said to be able to take a direct hit from a nuclear bomb and water pressure on par with twenty thousand meters under the sea.

And commands sent via C had the highest privilege-access rights to every terminal device owned by the Gigafloat Management Corporation. Naturally, the demon registration bracelets were no exception.

Of course, entry into Room C was severely restricted; even senior management of the Gigafloat Management Corporation and the mayor of Itogami City were not permitted entry.

Rumor even had it that C was an urban myth and did not really exist.

“I see... That’s why they’re after Asagi...”

“Huh?”

An uncomfortable look came over Asagi as Yaze stared at her intently.

“*Keh-keh.*” Mogwai laughed with delight.

Yaze covered his eyes with a look of anguish. “As the registered user, you’re the only one authorized to enter C. If you die, there won’t be anyone left to stop the demons’ rampage.”

“Huh...?!”

Asagi’s eyes flew wide open.

“What the—? This is news to me! Why would you make a system that’s personalized and not even tell the person— isn’t that nuts?! You did that completely without my consent...?!”

The indignant Asagi hauled Yaze up by his chest.

She might have been an accomplished hacker, but she was fundamentally an ordinary high school girl. Her programming work for the Gigafloat Management Corporation was nothing more than a part-time job for a little spending money. She’d never intended to bear a heavy responsibility that could decide the very fate of Itogami Island, let alone sought to put her own life in peril as a consequence.

However, in reality, without her being aware of it whatsoever, she had somehow been registered as the proper user for C, and a sniper was after her life because of it. Of course Asagi was angry. But— “Urk...!”

Grabbing hold of the raging Asagi, Yaze rolled onto the ground.

A bullet passed above both their heads, gouging a hole into the residential wall behind them. Fragments scattering from the impact of the shot showered down on Yaze’s back like scattered hail.

“I’ll listen to any complaints you have, but first, we’ve gotta do something ’bout this situation. I’m bringing you with me to Keystone Gate, whatever it

takes!” Yaze yelled as he forcibly dragged Asagi to her feet.

“If I don’t, this’ll seriously be Itogami Island’s final day.”

As Yaze murmured, a strange aura began swirling above his head. The demonic energy emitted by the raging demons was saturating and covering the sky above the island.

He had no idea what situation that foreshadowed, but he was certain of one thing: It wouldn’t end with anything good.

“Give me a break...,” Asagi murmured, copying the habit of a close friend of hers.

“Took the words outta my mouth.”

Yaze nodded, concurring from the bottom of his heart.

3

Dumbfounded, Yukina gazed down from the roof of a nearly destroyed building.

Demonic energy was running wild from every street and block.

Among them, it was indeed the vampire Beast Vassals inflicting the most spectacular damage. If fully unleashed, even the Beast Vassals of comparatively young vampires had enough might to blow away an entire residential home. However, this paled in comparison to the Beast Vassals of the Old Guard, with combat capability on par, or greater, than that of a state-of-the-art battle tank.

However, there was no organization to the places the Beast Vassals were summoned—or their targets. Yukina did not think that their power was running amok with any kind of conscious purpose. It was not of the demons’ own will; they had simply lost control. Someone had possessed them, making their demonic energy go berserk.

“How is...such a thing possible...?” she murmured haltingly as she continued to prop up Kojou’s wounded body.

A force of over twenty thousand demons’ demonic energy had run amok—an

enormous calamity without precedent. *How can such a thing be stopped?* she pondered, but no answer was forthcoming.

The Island Guard was moving to contain the situation, but the insufficiency of their fighting strength was plainer than an open flame. Furthermore, the Gigafloat Management Corporation that commanded them had lost numerous senior managers, remaining in a state of chaos to that moment.

Even if she requested aid from Lion King Agency HQ, it was futile to expect reinforcements.

The seas around Itogami Island remained sealed off via Senga's Eight Trigrams Formation. Everything was proceeding according to the scenario Tartarus Lapse had drawn up. That fact left Yukina in despair.

"What can I...? What should I do...?"

Stricken by a bottomless sense of emptiness, Yukina unwittingly cast her eyes downward.

Perhaps apprehending December or Senga might ameliorate the situation, but now that Itogami Island was in extreme chaos, finding them was nigh impossible.

Natsuki might have been able to offer advice had she been there. But at that moment, she too remained unable to move. Asagi was under attack by a sniper, with it unclear whether she was alive or dead, and Kojou had fallen, gravely wounded and on the brink of death.

"Senpai..."

Yukina held Kojou's head to her chest as she leaned forward.

She was the only one uninjured and able to move, and yet she could do nothing, save pathetically watch the sight of Itogami Island collapsing. Yukina's powerlessness had been made painfully apparent.

Her eyes grew hot. She let out a brief sob, hanging her head. And then...

That was when someone's very, very cold hands gently caressed Yukina's cheeks.

"That's some face you're making, Himeragi."

The supposedly unconscious Kojou opened his eyes, calling to her in a small, raspy voice. Yukina, taken completely off guard, gazed at the sight of him.

“Senpai...?! You’ve returned to consciousness already...?”

“Somehow, yeah...”

Koff! went Kojou as he unsteadily sat up.

Though many of his internal organs had ruptured due to the dozens of bullets he’d taken, Kojou’s body had mostly finished regenerating in that brief span of time. Compared to the previous times he’d nearly died, his recovery speed had plainly quickened. Kojou’s power as a vampire was increasing.

Though that fact invited worries of its own, it wasn’t the time or place to ponder them.

“Damn, that bastard Senga pumped me full of bullets without holding back one bit. Hurt enough to die from.”

Kojou spoke resentfully as he patted his tattered parka.

His words, both buffoonish and exceedingly blunt, allowed Yukina to let go of a breath she’d been holding in. Kojou looked back at her with a mystified look and said, “So, Himeragi. Why are you crying?”

“I am not crying,” replied Yukina in a flat tone, gently averting her face.

“Mn? ...Um, but...”

“I was not crying. So there.”

“Nah, your eyes are totally red.”

“A vampire is not in any position to talk. More importantly, senpai, the city!”

“Whoa!”

Kojou, looking at the city streets below them, cried out from tremendous shock.

Roads and buildings were being destroyed by the demonic riot, and fires were breaking out in urban areas all over. He heard the sounds of human screams and ambulance sirens coming ceaselessly from within the city.

“The hell is this...?! What happened while I was asleep?!”

“The registered demons have lost control of their demonic energy. I’m not sure of exactly how this was orchestrated, but I have no doubt that it is the work of Tartarus Lapse.”

“So they forced the demonic energy to run amok, huh? Come to think of it, it’s a little like what December did to me.”

“Yes.”

Kojou’s murmur made Yukina nod. During their first fight with December in the warehouse district, she’d employed mind control on Kojou to hijack command of his Beast Vassals.

The phenomenon erupting on Itogami Island very much resembled the situation back then. It probably wasn’t a coincidence. Perhaps they had reverse engineered the ability of December’s Beast Vassal and fashioned a ritual to reproduce it.

“And Asagi...?” Kojou asked with a hard look.

Yukina shook her head without a word. In these chaotic circumstances, Yukina had no means by which to determine whether Asagi was safe. The *shikigami* she’d released to search for her had already been lost, swept up in the demonic energy rampage.

Kojou silently twisted his lips. To the sniper after Asagi, the several minutes Kojou had been unconscious were more than enough time to complete her mission. In the end, Kojou had been unable to stop Tartarus Lapse’s sniper. Regret and despair over that fact weighed heavily upon Kojou’s heart.

It was a moment after that when Kojou heard a snarky, synthetic voice.

“It’s all right. Li’l miss Asagi is still alive... Somehow or other.”

“You’re...Mogwai?!”

Kojou’s cell phone, LCD screen cracked, was speaking in the voice of Asagi’s AI partner.

“Keh-keh.” Mogwai laughed at the surprised Kojou. *“I’ll skip the fine details. Asagi’s heading for Keystone Gate. The demon riot happening in the city was*

caused by hacking the demon registration bracelets."

"Hacking?" Kojou tilted his head, completely beside himself. "You mean the demon registration bracelets got jacked? People can do that?"

"Well, someone can. And right now, the li'l miss is the only one who can stop it."

"So that's why Senga and the others are after Asagi...!"

If that abnormality was caused by Tartarus Lapse hacking, that explained Asagi coming under sniper fire. Senga and the others feared Asagi's genius-level programming abilities.

If she got to Keystone Gate safe and sound, Asagi could put a stop to the demons' rampage.

That would likely inflict fatal damage to Tartarus Lapse's plans.

"Tell us where Asagi is, Mogwai. We'll back her up."

"The feeling's appreciated, but I've got a different request for the Fourth Primogenitor an' company."

"...Request?" Kojou echoed back. He didn't think any action took precedent over keeping Asagi safe when someone was after her life that very moment.

However, Mogwai continued, speaking for once in a dead serious tone. *"For now, could you...stop Itogami Island from being smashed to bits before the li'l miss can do something about the bracelets?"*

"Itogami Island, smashed to bits...? How...?"

"—Look up, Bro."

Prompted by the AI's voice, Kojou turned his face upward. He was at a loss for further words... Itogami Island's sky was covered in mysterious hieroglyphics in a radius reaching dozens of kilometers.

This was both like a dense aurora and a vortex of demonic energy. Perhaps one might say it looked like a beautiful flower garden—crimson, ethereal flowers borne of demonic energy.

"Roses...?"

“No, senpai...this is a magic circle. One of unbelievably high density...,” Yukina corrected in a quivering voice.

Her words made Kojou realize the true nature of the roses for himself. The large-scale phenomenon was the result of merging multiple layers of complex symbols atop one another. It was a magic circle large enough to envelop the entirety of Itogami Island. The vast demonic energy furnished by the Demon Sanctuary was what made its materialization possible.

The crimson magic circle was absorbing the demonic energy of the twenty thousand registered demons living on Itogami Island to take form.

Their collapsing unconscious left and right was probably not caused by the demonic energy running amok alone. It was because the magic circle was draining their energy.

“So those are the Roses of Tartarus...”

Kojou’s entire body trembled with fear.

Even he, lean on knowledge of sorcery, could understand just how dangerous that magic circle was. The vast demonic energy swirling above Itogami Island that moment rivaled that of the dark god Zazalamagiu before.

“But what do they intend to do by gathering up so much demonic ener...?”

Yukina seemed to realize something, her breath catching as she looked up, her face pale.

From the roses formed via magic circles, countless rose petals were fluttering downward. These, in turn, were collections of demonic energy so dense that they could take physical form. Finally, they changed to adopt the forms of sentient beasts.

“It couldn’t be?!”

“Beast Vassals—?! ”

Yukina and Kojou shouted out simultaneously.

The Beast Vassals borne from the Roses of Tartarus unleashed howls bathed in demonic energy. The shock wave transformed into incandescent flames, falling toward the urban areas of Itogami Island.

The Beast Vassals wrought from the scarlet roses numbered six. Each had a total length of around three to five meters. Their materialization was incomplete, but they maintained virtually perfect bestial contours. Though their strength did not quite reach the level of Old Guard Beast Vassals, there was no doubting they were formidable.

Pitch-black flames wreathed in demonic energy burned the ground of the artificial isle. It wasn't in a district with a high population density, but that did not change the fact the situation was dangerous.

And what truly surprised Kojou was that the Beast Vassal summoning was still ongoing. As demonic energy caused the scarlet petals to bloom and scatter, the number of Beast Vassals increased; one here, one there. They proceeded to flutter down toward the ground of Itogami Island, spreading unlimited destruction to and fro.

"Who the heck's summoning them...?"

Kojou's face twisted in fear as he posed the question to Yukina. December had to be a powerful Old Guard vampire, but he didn't think a single person could summon Beast Vassals in those numbers, let alone control them all; that seemed an impossibility.

"I believe the magic circle itself is acting as the host. It is using the demonic energy drained from demons throughout the city to indiscriminately summon Beast Vassals."

Yukina replied with a stiff expression. *No way*, went Kojou, looking back at her in surprise.

"How do they plan on making the Beast Vassals do as they're told?"

"No, control is unnecessary. At the very least, not to Tartarus Lapse—"

"You're telling me they *wanted* indiscriminate attacks...?!"

Every drop of blood in Kojou's body froze in fear and anger.

December and her group's objective was the destruction of Itogami Island.

They weren't even trying to use the Beast Vassals summoned by the Roses of Tartarus for precise attacks. Now Kojou finally understood why they were called a Demon Sanctuary wrecking crew.

Indiscriminate Beast Vassal summons via the demonic energy drained from registered demons—*this* was the ultimate demolition job, one that could only be realized in a Demon Sanctuary. This was the truth behind the trick they'd kept shrouded in mystery.

"Senpai!"

"Got it! C'mon over, Regulus Aurum—!"

Kojou shot the lightning lion toward the Beast Vassals flying to and fro overhead. Servants of primogenitors were materialized, high-density masses of demonic energy. Furthermore, normal weapons could not inflict damage upon them. It was said that there was no way to defeat Beast Vassals save through smashing them with stronger demonic energy.

The only weapons that could oppose Beast Vassals were the large-caliber sorcerous weapons in the Island Guard's possession, powerful sorcerous objects in the possession of some federal Attack Mages, and vampiric Beast Vassals.

However, the Island Guard's guardsmen were busy suppressing the rioting demons and engaging in search and rescue; they had nothing in reserve to fight Beast Vassals. The same no doubt went for federal Attack Mages.

And thanks to Tartarus Lapse's hacking, registered demons had virtually all fallen into an unconscious state. That moment, the only one left who could stop the Roses' Beast Vassals was an unregistered vampire lacking a demon registration bracelet—in other words, Kojou.

Fortunately, the power of those servants couldn't hold a candle to the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor. That single blow from the lightning lion ripped them to tatters, whereupon they vanished.

He could push them back, no problem. Yet, a moment after Kojou judged it to be so— "...They came back?!"

The Roses' familiars, surely shredded by the lightning lion, returned to their bestial forms.

Kojou ordered his own Beast Vassal to attack once more, but the result was the same. No matter how much the lightning lion destroyed them, the Roses' Beast Vassals kept increasing in number.

“The summoning is ongoing.”

Yukina kept her gaze on the crimson magic circle as she murmured ruefully. The Rose petals scattered with increasing speed, perhaps to counteract Kojou's attack. It continued propagating Beast Vassals, their numbers already exceeding dozens; she could no longer keep an exact count.

“The more I smash 'em, the faster more of 'em come?! Then—”

Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal. This was a gleaming, two-headed quicksilver dragon Beast Vassal—the dimension eater that consumed space itself.

The enormous, open maws of the twinned dragon mercilessly charged into the magic circle covering the very sky. They shaved away the magic circle along with space itself, distorting it in the unsightly fashion of a flower being eaten by an insect.

But this too was for a single moment alone. With the vast demonic energy supplied to it from the ground, the magic circle restored itself, and the Roses' Beast Vassals' numbers increased further still.

“Erasing space itself—and still no good...?!”

Kojou's voice was racked with urgency. The Roses' Beast Vassals could no longer be held back by the lightning lion alone. One part of the Beast Vassals descended toward the ground as the other part of the horde bore down on Kojou and Yukina.

“Shit! C'mon over, Mesarthim Adamas! Sadalmelik Albus! Natra Cinereus!”

Kojou clicked his tongue as he summoned new Beast Vassals.

The bighorn sheep constructed of diamonds scattered its crystal gemstones about; the silver, shelled beast transformed buildings into mist to protect the city. Then, the giant water maid restored the destroyed city in twisted form.

It was far from a complete job, but this was the limit of Kojou's current

abilities.

Fundamentally, the all-too-powerful Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor could be used for nothing save destruction. The slightest slip in control and, far from protecting the city, the enemy Beast Vassals would be destroyed utterly—and all of Itogami Island with them.

“This ain’t...good... Figures I’ve pissed ’em off...”

Kojou gritted his teeth as he glared at the approaching Roses’ Beast Vassals. At that moment, Kojou’s hands were full with intercepting newly emerging enemies and protecting urban areas. There was nothing left in the tank to summon a new Beast Vassal to protect Kojou himself.

However, the Roses’ familiars were clearly aiming at Kojou, thoroughly singling him out as an enemy for destroying their brethren to that extent.

The Roses’ incomplete Beast Vassals had various forms. One was like a bat; another was like a ravenous bird of prey. Perhaps their movements were so simple because they did not possess complete sentience. All they were doing was enveloping their entire bodies in demonic energy flames, charging straight toward their targets.

Among them was a single, small Beast Vassal that looked like a dinosaur; this one swung flame-enveloped talons down toward Kojou’s back. Just before striking him, one flash from a silver blade struck it down.

Yukina’s demonic energy-nullifying spear impaled it. Snowdrift Wolf, called the Lion King Agency’s secret weapon, was the purging spear that could annihilate even a vampiric primogenitor. The glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect wrapped around its silver blade, smashing the Roses’ Beast Vassal like fragile sugarcane, whereupon it vanished.

“Himeragi...! Sorry, you saved me there!”

“Think nothing of it. I am your watcher, so it is only natural. More importantly, senpai...”

“I get it. At this rate, the city won’t hold together long enough for Asagi to reach Keystone Gate,” Kojou muttered, wiping fresh sweat from his brow.

The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor that Kojou had summoned were being overwhelmed. However, fresh Beast Vassals wrought from the magic circle in the sky above, seemingly without limit, had nearly descended all the way to the city. Try as he might, it was impossible for Kojou to intercept them all alone.

The amount of demonic energy in the Fourth Primogenitor's possession was nearly limitless, but the willpower with which Kojou controlled it was not. Controlling the too-powerful Beast Vassals chafed at his nerves, accelerating his rate of fatigue. The way things were going, it was only a matter of time before even Kojou's Beast Vassals went berserk.

"What should we do, Himeragi?"

"That's... If we cannot halt the Roses of Tartarus's supply of demonic energy, defeating the caster controlling the Roses is the only..."

"Caster...?"

"Yes. There must be a caster maintaining the magic circle that robbed control of the demon registration bracelets."

"A caster... I see, the one Senga called Raan must be her..."

Just before the Roses activated, Senga let a command fly to his comrade through use of an earphone mic. The order went to the final member of Tartarus Lapse, who they'd met at the animal hospital. She was probably the hub keeping the magic circle going.

"But how do we find out where she is...?"

"I am sorry... Senpai... I tried using search rituals, but I do not have the strength to see all of Itogami Island..."

The dejected Yukina looked down as she shook her head, about to cry. As a Sword Shaman, Yukina specialized in close combat against demons. Complex ritual spells were outside her specialty.

"Nothin' you need to apologize for, Himeragi. Not like I can do it, either."

"No, but..."

"In the end, nothing we can do but wait for Asagi to do somethin' about the

hacking, huh...? It's gone exactly like Mogwai said. Crap!!"

Kojou let loose a throwaway laugh as he spread both arms wide. The sarcastic AI had no doubt told Kojou and Yukina to protect the island because he'd figured from the start that this would happen.

But maybe even the world's best supercomputers couldn't predict the Roses of Tartarus turned out to be a summoning circle that's this much of a pain in the ass, thought Kojou.

The damage to the urban areas was clearly increasing. The propagation of the Roses' Beast Vassals increased, their current destructive power thoroughly rivaling that of Kojou's own. Kojou could no longer protect Itogami Island by himself.

It's no good, thought Kojou, struck by a premonition of despair. And then...

With an incredible roar, a giant beam of light raced across Itogami Island's sky.

5

It was a large-scale ritual cannon reminiscent of a warship's main artillery.

It had an overwhelming amount of magical energy rivaling even the Beast Vassals of a primogenitor. The attack engulfed dozens of Beast Vassals summoned via the Roses of Tartarus, not even having time to scream before being erased.

"Der Freischütz...", Yukina belatedly murmured as she realized the true nature of the sudden ritual spell cannon attack.

A single arrow flying at high speed had created the enormous beam. The whistle embedded in its tip was employed to chant spells at too high an intensity than could be reproduced by human beings.

It was a spell arrow from Der Freischütz, a prototype area-suppression weapon granted to a particular Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

The fresh whistling arrow flew in, echoing with a special type of strange sound.

This strange sound created countless small-sized magic circles, each of which transformed into an arrow of light, precisely shooting through the Roses' Beast Vassals descending upon urban areas—the projectiles struck nothing else.

“Multi-lock with killer bullets... This technique; it couldn't be...”

“Amazing,” Kojou whispered, eyes wide. Yukina, right beside him, felt just as compelled to watch the events in the sky.

Both of their fields of view caught a small black silhouette that resembled a bird. It seemed to cut through the atmosphere, gliding just over the surface of the ocean. As it approached the island, they realized that this “small” silhouette was actually quite large.

Its serpentine body resembled the long-extinct dinosaurs; its giant wings had a wingspan of over ten meters. It was a dragon with a mane the color of steel.

“Kojou! Yukii!”

One of the girls riding the dragon's back waved a hand toward Kojou and Yukina.

Kojou knew her name. He'd met the Sword Shaman girl on the mainland only a few days earlier.

“Yui? And Sayaka...and Shio, even...!”

Yukina's eyes went wide with surprise. In addition to Yui Haba, there were two other girls on the dragon. Each held a silver bow at the ready. These two were Sayaka Kirasaka and Shio Hikawa, Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency. It was they who had unleashed the spell arrows that had shot down the Roses' Beast Vassals.

“You're...Glenda, right?!”

“Daaah!!”

The silver dragon began to transform as it fluttered down to the building upon which Kojou and Yukina stood. The enormous dragon was transforming into a long-haired, small-statured girl.

Of course, once her transformation had finished, the girl wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing. Kojou stiffened as the buck-naked girl embraced him.

“Aaaaagh?! Wait a... What are you doing, Kojou Akatsuki?!”

“Glenda, wait! Clothes—put on some clothes!!”

Sayaka and Yuiri both nervously raced to Kojou’s side.

Shio, coldly glaring at Kojou, approached Yukina. “Yukina Himeragi, it seems you’re all right. Can I ask you to explain the situation?”

“Yes, Shio. But how on Earth did you get to Itogami Island...?”

“We were close to Itogami Island in the first place. Thanks to the Eight Trigrams Formation obstructing us, we couldn’t get close, but somehow, we managed to decipher it, and then—”

“You managed to decipher an Eight Trigrams ritual...from the inside...?!”

“Ah, er, well... It’s not as if I did it by myself...”

The glimmering praise from Yukina brought an uncomfortable-looking expression over Shio. Apparently, she was struggling with explaining that her accomplishment was actually a joint effort between her and Sayaka—a very Shio-like thing to strain herself over.

Then, seeing Shio and Yukina speaking on such warm terms, that very Sayaka nervously barged right in.

“What are you doing getting friendly with *my* Yukina, Shio Hikawa?!”

“Because, Kirasaka, you got distracted by a man and took your sweet time!”

“Excuse you?! I’ll have you know, it’s not as if I was distracted by him that much...!”

“Nah, you were *totally* focused on him. Felt like nothing else was in your sights at all.”

“That’s not true! And if you’re going to say that, Yuiri Haba is a lot more—”

“Yui has nothing to do with this!”

For a time, Yukina watched dumbfounded as her two seniors glared at each other forehead to forehead. But judging it to be no time for such things, she quickly regained her senses.

“Um... May I explain...?” she began, clearing her throat.

Noticing this, Sayaka and Shio hastily composed themselves.

“—The situation, as you can see, is an indiscriminate attack with all of Itogami City as the target. The instigator is a Demon Sanctuary demolition group calling itself Tartarus Lapse. Known members include a vampire calling herself December, a feng shui practitioner named Takehito Senga, a pyrokinesis-wielding homunculus teenage boy named Logi, as well as a sniper.”

“Also, a hacker who took over the demon registration bracelet system,” Kojou added, Glenda still climbing all over his back in the meantime.

“Demon registration bracelets... I see; so that’s it...”

“That must be where the demonic energy to summon the Beast Vassals is coming from...”

Shio and Sayaka nodded with instant comprehension. Though there were numerous flaws in their cooperative spirit, they were indeed excellent Attack Mages.

Kojou continued. “Asagi’s headed to Keystone Gate to do something ’bout this. Until then, we’ve gotta protect the island from these Beast Vassals, but—”

“In other words, we need to search for the caster controlling the magic circle?” Sayaka interrupted. The way she readily voiced the plan was enough to shock him.

“You can do it?”

“But of course.” Looking back at the surprised Kojou, Sayaka thrust out her chest with pride.

Shio followed up without missing a beat. “Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency are experts in ritual spells and assassination. Of course, we learn methods to counter ritual spells as well. Tracing a caster is the most basic of the basics.”

“Wait a... I was planning on saying that...!”

“Reverberate—”

Taking spell scrolls from the breast of her uniform, Shio began an abbreviated chant. The spell scrolls transformed into a flock of countless birds, scattering to every corner of Itogami Island.

“Aww, sheesh...!”

Sayaka, too, scattered spell scrolls about, seemingly to spite Shio. The numbers of *shikigami* produced by the two Shamanic War Dancers totaled just over a hundred. They lined up in orderly rows as they began circling the sky above Itogami Island, tracing the demonic energy from the Roses of Tartarus to search for the caster’s location.

“Now, then. We need to buy some time until we can pinpoint the caster’s location.”

“Yui, sorry, but I’m counting on your support. Looks like it’ll take a while to charge the ritual energy again.”

Sayaka and Shio both spoke to their comrade as they poised their respective silver recurve bows.

The enemy servants Sayaka and Shio had destroyed had already finished regenerating. The pair intended to shoot them down once more.

“Rosen Chevalier Plus—Boot Up!”

Yui drew her sword from the instrument case she carried on her back. Like Sayaka’s Lustrous Scale, this sword was instilled with a ritual to slash through space itself; it was a holy armament powerful enough to even cut through Beast Vassals. She no doubt intended to intercept any approaching Beast Vassals from the Roses until Shio and Sayaka could ready their spell arrows.

“I’ll protect Kirasaka and Hikawa. Relax for a bit, ’kay, Kojou?”

“Er, but...”

“You must be tired. You’re sweating a lot.”

When Yui pointed it out, Kojou finally realized just how worn-out he had become. He’d been continuously using five Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor to protect Itogami Island.

He’d fought December before that, too. Unsurprisingly, his body had reached

its limit.

“Yukii, take care of Kojou, please?”

Yui left those words behind as she raced ahead.

Reflexively, Kojou began to follow her, but Yukina stopped him.

“Senpai, I must have a word with you.”

Looking pressed into a corner, Yukina beckoned Kojou with her hand.

She practically dragged him toward the stairway of the half-broken building.

6

Yukina dragged Kojou into the corridor of the building's top floor. It seemed to be some kind of import-export company warehouse; perhaps the employees had already finished evacuating, because Kojou couldn't feel the presence of a single soul around them.

The walls of the dimly lit corridor were cracked, and from time to time, they could hear the sound of explosions through those cracks. Sayaka and Shio were in the midst of their battle against the Roses' Beast Vassals.

When Yukina stopped, still with her back to him, Kojou asked her, “Himeragi? What's up with bringing me to a place like this? You fine just leaving Kirasaka and the others like that?”

His words elicited a twitch from Yukina's shoulders. She trembled. She stared at the ground. A little sigh escaped her lips as she finally settled upon something. She turned toward him.

“Senpai.”

“Y-yeah?”

Yukina came off as oddly more formal than usual, which made Kojou tense. As he waited for her, she silently closed her eyes and clasped both hands together in front of her chest, raising her chin up ever so slightly.

It was as if she wanted Kojou to kiss her.

“Errr, Himeragi...?”

“It is fine.”

Yukina’s pink lips trembled before his bewildered eyes. Her whisper-like voice sent Kojou’s heart into a somersault.

“Huh?”

“I mean, you may drink...my blood... P-please don’t make me say it again...”

“Blood? Ah, blood... That’s what you meant...”

Geez, don’t scare me like that, he thought, letting go of a held breath. His feelings were mixed, somehow both relieved and disappointed.

“Er, wait. You want me to drink your blood—here?”

“Yes.”

Yukina still had not opened her eyes. Kojou couldn’t help being captivated by her beautiful eyelashes.

“Er, but Kirasaka and company are, like, right beside us...”

“I understand. That’s why I would appreciate if you made it quick...”

Faint redness speckled Yukina’s cheeks as she made her request, urging him to hurry up. Eyes shut, completely defenseless, she drew closer to him. Kojou spontaneously pressed Yukina back by her shoulders.

“But why...all of a sudden like this...?” he asked.

“Do you remember? About Miss December’s ability...”

“The ability to control Beast Vassals... No... That’s not right...”

Kojou vaguely mulled the words over. Yukina neither affirmed nor refuted them.

The bare visage December had hid behind a helmet and goggles was the spitting image of the girl Kojou had seen countless times in his dreams.

Avrora Florestina. The previous Fourth Primogenitor who had granted Kojou her power and vanished.

The twelfth Kaleid Blood— December looked just like Avrora.

“If my guess is correct, it will be simple to seal Miss December’s Beast Vassal.”

Yukina opened her eyes, staring straight at Kojou from right in front of him.

“Senpai, you simply need not grant her the right to control the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals. If your power as a vampire is strengthened, you should be able to nullify Miss December’s ability—”

“Ah... So that’s why you’re telling me to drink your blood all of a sudden.”

“Th-this time is a special case—an emergency situation, so...”

Cheeks still red, Yukina couldn’t hide her concern.

Her gaze fell to her own breasts, and after that, she looked at Kojou with upturned eyes.

Yukina was a pretty girl, but not the type you could call sexy. Her slender body still looked much like that of a child’s, something she herself was no doubt well aware of.

And vampiric urges—a vampire’s thirst for blood—was triggered not by hunger, but by lust. In other words, for Kojou to drink Yukina’s blood, he had to feel sexual arousal toward her.

“Am I not...good enough?” Yukina asked in a tiny voice.

“No, no.” Kojou shook his head. “It’s not that you’re not good enough, Himeragi... It’s just, this situation is a little, you know...”

He grimaced as he stared at the cracked walls and the stairway behind him. He was in a bind; practically right beside them, Sayaka and the others were engaged in deadly combat with ferocious Beast Vassals that would not cease, yet, he was being asked to drink a girl’s blood.

The best example he could think of was if you were commanded to eat a meal on a battlefield with cannon fire being exchanged overhead. No matter how grand the feast before your eyes, it just wouldn’t seem very tasty.

“So you are heedful of what is around us and cannot concentrate, then?”

Yukina nodded, accepting his words. *Guess she understands*, thought Kojou, sighing a little in relief.

“Understood. Then, senpai. Please close your eyes.”

“R-right.”

Kojou did as Yukina told him and closed his eyes. Once Yukina saw he had done so, Kojou felt like she was moving somehow. All he could hear was the faint sound of fabric shifting. Of course, he knew that there had to be some reason behind her actions; he just hadn’t the foggiest idea what she was thinking.

When an unexpectedly long period of time passed, and Kojou naturally began to feel anxious, he felt some kind of soft fabric covering his eyes. Kojou realized he’d been blindfolded.

“Himeragi? What is...?”

“Please pay no heed. It is my uniform’s interior. My handkerchief was not long enough, so...”

“Eh? By uniform interior, you mean...?”

Realizing that it was the camisole Yukina had been wearing all that time, Kojou was ferociously thrown into confusion. He was being blindfolded by a girl’s camisole— *What kind of situation is this supposed to be?! he thought.*

“It smells kind of nice, actually... Like soap.”

“Please do not smell it! I do not need an explanation, so...!”

“Uh, even if you tell me not to... After— Wait, what’s this...?”

Kojou tried to wrap his head around it all as he realized Yukina had grasped his hand. She proceeded to guide Kojou’s fingertips so that they touched something.

What he felt seemed highly magnetic—a smooth softness that seemed to wrap around something. Amid the coolness, he felt a faint warmth residing within, the comfortable temperature specific to human flesh. His palm was unwittingly drawn in.

“H-Himeragi... Don’t tell me this is...”

The realization that he was touching Yukina’s bare waist left Kojou at a loss

for words.

Perhaps the blindfold robbing him of his sight had made his sense of touch far more acute than normal. The pleasant tingles from the touch of his flesh against hers were transmitted through the nerves of his fingertips.

“How...is it...?” Yukina asked, fervently suppressing the shyness in her voice.

Kojou tried to come up with a reply, but he was too moved to easily put it into words.

“Yeah, it’s amazing. I’m not sure what to really say, but I feel like I could do this forever.”

“Um, please do not touch too much... It tickles.”

Yukina’s tone relaxed as Kojou’s words put her at ease.

Perhaps it was tension that made Yukina breathe just a little faster. Kojou’s refined senses conveyed her body temperature, the smell of her hair, her breathing, and even the beats of her heart.

Yukina’s lithe, supple body was both taut and soft. Her musculature drew beautiful body lines and an exquisite physique, and under that glossy skin stretched blood vessels, and within them coursed *sweet blood*— The instant he traced that image in the back of his mind, Kojou’s entire body was stricken with carnal thirst.

“S-senpai?!”

Kojou put his arms around Yukina and enthusiastically drew her in. Both his hands were free to stroke Yukina’s entire body to his heart’s content. He rubbed his cheek against her ear, and breathed in the sweet scent of her hair. Then he gave her defenseless earlobe a soft nibble.

“That’s—not...!”

Yukina arched back as if struck by a powerful electric jolt. Kojou’s right hand held her close by her exposed shoulder blade. Simultaneously, Kojou’s left hand gently wrapped around the swell of her breasts.

“W-wait, please... You mustn’t... N-no...”

Yukina earnestly engaged in defiant behavior. However, behind those words, her resistance was frail. Still blindfolded, Kojou's lips sought out Yukina's neck, largely guided by instinct.

Kojou's sharp, elongated fangs broke Yukina's skin and sank into her— "...!"

Within his arms, Yukina's shoulders trembled slightly. Kojou politely lapped up her blood as it flowed out. Yukina was a Sword Shaman—a priestess possessing great power. As he took in her blood, infused with spiritual energy, his own demonic energy boiled throughout his entire body.

Kojou felt as if the beasts sleeping within his blood had let out a cry of joy.

Even so, Kojou's thirst had not abated. His vampiric instincts wanted to consume more of Yukina's blood.

Desperately defying the craving, Kojou pulled back his fangs. He sensed that if he continued any further, Yukina would be in grave danger.

Embracing the consenting Yukina, it was a moment later when he felt both her hands wrap around his back.

"No, senpai... Don't stop... Please, drink more..."

She pressed her entire body against him to stop him from pulling away. Kojou felt throbs of joy from the last traces of Yukina's blood as he weakly shook his head.

He had already taken quite a bit of her blood. She had to be near her limit.

It wasn't as simple a matter of the dangers of excessive blood loss, either. There was even danger of Kojou's vampiric acts causing a permanent change in her anatomy.

That danger was of pseudo-vampirization, transmitted through blood—turning her into Kojou's Blood Vassal.

"No, Himeragi... Any more, and your body'll..."

"But at this rate, you might not be able to defeat Miss December... So..."



Yukina's body underwent tiny spasms several times before strength rapidly drained from it.

Blood was rushing to her flushed cheeks, and she continued to breathe raggedly. Her endurance was indeed at its limit.

"Himeragi..."

Kojou removed the makeshift blindfold. He laid Yukina's body down on top of a nearby sofa.

Having taken off her uniform and camisole, Yukina's breasts were covered only by a simple bra. Her skin was so fair it was almost translucent; the faint-pink hue made it surprisingly pretty.

Thanks to that, Kojou's vampiric urges were stimulated once more. The unbearable dryness in his throat drew out a moan. Then— *Clatter!* went the loud, suspicious sound Kojou heard from immediately behind him.

"Dah...?"

"Glenda, don't...!"

When Kojou looked back, he caught sight of Glenda and Yuiri, poking out only half of their faces from a pillar's shadow.

They'd probably been peeking, watching Kojou drink Yukina's blood the whole time.

Yui's face was beet red to the tips of her ears from arousal.

For her part, Glenda looked like she'd tried to view Kojou and Yukina from closer range, and Yuiri had put her in a headlock to stop her. The earlier sound had been caused by Yuiri's sword when she'd fallen over in the scuffle.

"Miss...Yui...?"

Yukina slightly opened her eyes and looked at Yuiri, who nervously shook her head.

"Y-Yukii, I'm not... I didn't mean to peek... Um, Shio and Sayaka seem all right, and Glenda was tired, so I thought I'd let her rest with you and... I didn't mean — I didn't see anything!!"

As Yuiri continued her excuses, a deep-crimson fluid trickled over her mouth and dripped from her lips. Her own blood.

Perhaps it was from shaking her head too hard; perhaps it was due to mental agitation and arousal. A line of blood ran from her nostril.

Seemingly drawn by the scent of that blood, Kojou walked in Yuiri's direction.

"K-Kojou... Wait... Eh?"

As Yuiri inched away, for some reason, Glenda was pressing on her back. It was as if Glenda was appealing to Kojou to put on a new show.

"Senpai... This is an emergency, so this time only, I shall grant a special exemption. This time only...!"

Yukina's cheeks puffed up in dismay as she haltingly spoke in a resigned voice.

Those words unshackled Kojou, and he drew close to Yuiri.

"Y-Yukii...?! Permit what? And Glenda, what are you grabbing me for?!"

Kojou chased Yuiri, bewildered, into a corner. As if to indicate her resignation, Yuiri raised both hands up to her shoulders and shook her head as she said, "Wa...wait, um... It's not that I don't want to; it's just my first time... I'm not emotionally prepared for..."

"Sorry, Yuiri. Just bear with it a few moments."

With Yuiri abandoning resistance, Kojou gently lifted up her small, fine chin.

Kojou harshly thrust his fangs into her quivering, slender neck.

"N-no way... D-don't look, Yukii... Ah..."

After initially stiffening from momentary pain, Yuiri finally sank her body into Kojou's. Her voice had begun to mix with sweet, outward breaths. The fresh blood coursing into the Fourth Primogenitor's body quenched his thirst.

Gazing at Kojou and Yuiri with half-lidded eyes, Yukina let out a soft "Goodness," sighing and pouting.

Even then, the magic symbol covering the whole of the island's sky continued summoning Beast Vassals.

Sayaka and Shio dispatched the still-descending horde with their ritual spell cannons. Finally, additional servants were created, and these, too, intercepted. The cycle repeated over and over.

Though they were holding up tactically, Sayaka and Shio of course understood that they could not keep fighting forever. Even with the aid of holy armaments, the pair's ritual energy had limits. On top of that, few spell arrows remained. When either one was exhausted, they would have no further means of defying the Beast Vassals from the Roses of Tartarus. There was only one way to save Itogami Island—they had to find the caster controlling the magic circle and neutralize her.

"Kirasaka, how many spell arrows do you have left?"

Shio kept her silver recurve bow—Freikugel Plus—poised. Her breathing was slightly ragged, and her expression was thickly colored with fatigue. Consecutive uses of the ritual spell cannon attack had taken quite a toll on Shio's body.

The same went for Sayaka. The might of her Der Freischütz made the extraordinary rate of spiritual energy depletion that much worse.

Even so, Sayaka hid her fatigue and replied as if she was fine.

"With the spares, six left! You?"

"Same here. Feels like I can hold out for about three, maybe four more minutes."

"Aww geez... There's no end to them...!"

Even as she complained, Sayaka unleashed a fresh spell arrow. The sight of its beautiful arc seemingly flowing through the air captivated even Shio.

That was why there was a momentary pause in Shio's thought process.

"...?!"

She suddenly realized that the maw of a creepy Beast Vassal resembling a deep-sea fish was drawing near above her head.

It was far too close for Shio to reload a spell arrow in time. Knowing this, her expression froze over.

It was completely her own fault. An apprentice Attack Mage, Shio knew her lack of real combat experience was the culprit. If a vampiric Beast Vassal squished her flat, as a flesh-and-blood human being, she would be taken out with ease.

“Shio Hikawa—!”

She saw Sayaka look back and shout, but Shio felt like she was watching the action in slow motion. Sayaka’s expression contorted out of urgency, leaving Shio calmly gazing at it. *So even she can make a face like that*, Shio thought, feeling introspective.

If I die, Yuiri will probably be sad.

That she would deeply regret.

On the other hand, Shio felt a strange sense of déjà vu.

She had faced death like this but a few days before. At the time, a middle-aged man calling himself Gajou Akatsuki had saved her. And now— “Al-Nasl Minium—!”

With the sound of an incredible *boom*, the enemy Beast Vassal before her eyes vanished. It had taken a roar from an enormous bicorn that mowed it down, blowing it away.

“Huh...?!”

A beautiful Beast Vassal with a scarlet mane had appeared to protect Shio and Sayaka. This was not like the crudely summoned, incomplete Beast Vassals from the Roses of Tartarus. This was a vampiric primogenitor’s Beast Vassal, and the powerful demonic energy dwelling within was in a different league altogether.

“You all right?! You’re...uh, Shio, right?”

“Kojou...A-Akatsuki...”

Shio was on the verge of collapse when the boy in the tattered parka held her up by her back.

For a moment, she saw traces of his father on the side of his face. Shio hastily shook her head to clear the image.

It was Kojou—previously assumed to be resting—who had rescued Shio a hairsbreadth from disaster.

She did not know what had happened in the brief span of time since Yukina led him away, but she *did* know that his purportedly depleted flesh was brimming with vast demonic energy.

“Th-thank you, Kojou Akatsuki. You saved me.”

“Sorry for putting it all on your back. I’ve got this!”

Kojou shot Shio a worry-free smile before he trained a hostile gaze over their heads.

Responding to Kojou’s will, the scarlet bicorn unleashed a howling shock wave at the Roses’ Beast Vassals, trampling them flat. Its might was overwhelming. The Roses’ Beast Vassals blotting out the sky above were whittled down before Shio’s eyes.

“Sayaka—!”

“Sorry we’re late, Sayaka!”

Yukina and Yuiri raced after Kojou, returning with Glenda in tow.

Looking back at the girls, Sayaka had the faint sense that something was off. She furled her brows. Somehow, Yukina and Yuiri both gave off a different air than before they’d vanished from sight. Sayaka thought they seemed lost in space...and their clothes were disheveled.

“Yuri Haba, your face is red. Are you all right? Your eyes seem wet...and Yukina’s, too?”

“W-we’re all right, really. It’s nothing.”

Yuri became peevish, refuting her as she subconsciously touched a hand to her neck. Seeing this, Sayaka gasped. She had a pretty good idea just why the air given off by Yuri and Yukina was different.

“Kojou Akatsuki, don’t tell me you... Again—!”

Sayaka was already marching toward Kojou when Shio grabbed her attention.

“Kirasaka, I’ve located the caster! Three o’clock, range 6,200!” Shio called out.

Sayaka bit her lip, shifting her thoughts in the direction Shio had indicated. It just wasn’t the time to chew out Kojou and the others.

“—Range 6,200? On top of the sea?”

Sayaka deployed one of her *shikigami*, using it as a medium through which to pinpoint the enemy’s location with spiritual sight.

Over there, a strange island floated. Its ground was as artificial as that of Itogami Island, but the greater half of its surface had already sunk into the sea, exposing the rest of it like a twisted, crescent moon.

The small amount of ground left above the water’s surface contained rows of destroyed buildings. The place, abandoned by even the Gigafloat Management Corporation, seemed like an uninhabited ruin. To think a creepy city like that existed on the water’s surface but a few short kilometers from Itogami Island...

“Island Old Southeast...the abandoned district...!”

“Abandoned district?” Sayaka echoed, astonished.

Kojou nodded with a complex, hard-to-read expression. It was a strange expression mixing both fondness...and regret.

“The abandoned Itogami Island District Twenty-Seven. The world’s first artificial isle ruin. Sank into the sea just nine months ago.”

“Why would they be all the way out there...?” Sayaka asked, skeptical.

However, Kojou gave a faint laugh that seemed to be at his own expense. Indeed, he seemed to be reproaching himself, as if saying *Why didn’t I realize it sooner?* If December would appear in one last place, it couldn’t have been anywhere else— “Let’s go, senpai.”

Yukina stood beside Kojou as she addressed him. Kojou tossed her a quick “yeah” and a nod, but his movements came to a halt as a perplexed expression came over him.

“How do we even get there...?”

Kojou turned his eyes toward the abandoned district, murmuring as if completely at a loss.

The connecting bridge between the abandoned district and Itogami Island proper was long gone. The only way to cross to the abandoned district was by boat.

That said, he didn't think they'd be lucky enough to find a boat for hire or a captain willing to head out to a place like that—even if Itogami Island was not in its current state of extreme chaos.

Perhaps Yuri saw that Kojou was in distress, for she posed a question to the dragon girl.

“Can you still fly, Glenda?”

Glenda exclaimed “Dah!!” and adopted a dramatic pose of unknown origin as she made a fervent nod.

“Th-then you're taking me with—”

Sayaka, slow on the uptake, hurriedly tried to assert her own existence. It was Shio who interrupted her.

“Wait, Kirasaka!”

“What?! You have a problem with th—”

On reflex, Sayaka tried to speak her obligatory complaint, but the look on the side of Shio's face made her swallow her words.

Shio was shaking with visible fright as she gazed above their heads.

A bizarre shift was occurring in the magic circle covering Itogami Island's sky.

All the rose petals scattered, changing form into four individual spheres.

They looked like gigantic seeds. This was the final form of the Roses of Tartarus. Its proudly blooming crimson rose petals fell away, from which new seeds had been born.

The innumerable enemy Beast Vassals had their demonic energy stolen by the seeds, seemingly shriveling away as they vanished one after the next. The demonic energy being absorbed by the seeds was already on a scale beyond

that which Sayaka and Shio could comprehend.

Enveloped within the abnormal amount of demonic energy, the seeds cracked.

From the magic circle's broken shell emerged four beasts.

One was a bird of prey; one resembled a crocodile. Yet another looked like a dragon, and the last one appeared as a tiger. They were enormous monsters all, surpassing twenty meters in total length. Just like vampiric Beast Vassals, these were masses of dense demonic energy.

"The Four Holy Beasts...!" Yukina exclaimed as she gazed up at the beasts' forms. Kojou knit his brows at the unfamiliar term.

"The heck are they?"

"They are the four mythological beasts governing the four corners of the sky—the very symbols of feng shui's power."

"As I recall, the city was built to correspond to the Four Beasts to begin with, wasn't it...?" Sayaka murmured, unable to contain her fright.

East, West, South, North—the four gigafloats comprising Itogami Island were supposedly designed adhering to feng shui to stabilize the artificial island. Takehito Senga, a preeminent feng shui practitioner, could not possibly have been ignorant of that fact. And the Roses of Tartarus ritual had been created with Senga's cooperation.

"If they manifested using the artificial isle's construction, those Four Holy Beasts are bigger monsters than a primogenitor's Beast Vassals. They should be able to annihilate even Itogami Island itself!"

"So this is Tartarus Lapse's main event...!"

Kojou sighed deeply, visibly annoyed. Even among his experiences to date, the situation was extremely bleak.

"Are you prepared, Shio Hikawa?"

"Are you? You know what we have to do, right?"

Sayaka and Shio glared at each other as they raised their respective recurve

bows.

Then Shio turned to Yuiri. “We’ll buy you time. Yuiri, take Kojou Akatsuki and the others with you, okay?”

“Yeah, got it. Glenda, please!”

“Dah!!”

Commanded by Yuiri, Glenda stripped off her clothes with great delight.

Then a silver dragon emerged, carrying Kojou and the others as it soared into the sky.

8

The bullet gouged a hole in the asphalt road.

It was precise shooting with an anti-materiel rifle, punching right through a faint gap in the guardrail. Bathed in fragments of the shattered bullet, Yaze tumbled spectacularly.

“Owwww!”

“M-Motoki?! Are you all right...?”

Head down in the shadow of a building, Asagi moved back in Yaze’s direction. *Stay back*, said the shooing movement his palm made toward her as Yaze gave an impetuous smile.

“Don’t worry. Fragments came flying my way; that’s all.”

Yaze’s ankle oozed with fresh blood as he pressed a hand to it and shifted his gaze toward the other side of the street.

An incredible number of Beast Vassals were rampaging in the sky above the island, but in contrast, the surface had quieted down a great deal. That was due to most of the berserking demons losing consciousness.

Somehow or other, Kojou and the Lion King Agency bunch were holding off the horde of Beast Vassals summoned by the magic circle. But that state of equilibrium probably wouldn’t hold for long. If they didn’t break up the demon registration bracelet hacking, Tartarus Lapse’s attack would be endless.

“More importantly, Asagi. What was your time in the hundred-meter sprint?”

“Hundred-meter?” Asagi looked taken aback by Yaze’s sudden question. “When I was timed back in spring, I was right around thirteen seconds, I think.”

“And that’s without spikes...? You really are a chunk of wasted high specs...” He exhaled, exasperated. “That’s a track-and-field club time.”

Naturally, Asagi looked peeved. “What was that for? Is this really the time to pick a fight with me?”

“Sorry, sorry. More to the point, you see that white building straight across the next intersection?”

“The stupidly big one on the right side?”

Asagi lifted her head up and saw the entrance to the building for herself. It was a branch office of the Gigafloat Management Corporation.

“Underground, it has a passage connected straight to Keystone Gate. It’s a secret passage built for emergency situations like this. Even most people in the Corporation don’t know about it.”

“So if we get there, no more danger of being sniped?”

“Yeah. And since they don’t know we’re heading for the passage, they can’t have planted a bomb there beforehand. Right, Mogwai?”

“Well, I suppose not,” Mogwai replied bluntly in response to the proud rise in Yaze’s brows. *“But the problem is you’ll be a sitting duck for the sniper while crossing the intersection. Even with li’l miss’s legs, it’ll be about seven secs’ worth. I don’t think that sniper’ll let that go to waste.”*

“Seven seconds...”

Yaze sensed Asagi swallowing hard.

It was a wide intersection with two car lanes each way and not a single shred of cover anywhere. A female high schooler at a full sprint would make a fine target for a sniper.

There were a number of abandoned cars parked nearby, but that anti-materiel rifle probably had enough might to punch through civilian cars like

paper.

“So there’s no other path?”

“I won’t say no, but if we take the scenic route, we’re playing into their hands. No time for it, either.”

Yaze looked up at the magic circle in the sky as he frailly shook his head.

At some point, the horde of over a hundred Beast Vassals had vanished from sight. In their place had appeared four enormous individual spheres. It wasn’t clear to Yaze exactly what was happening, but he was sure it was nothing good.

“So on my signal, run. If you get underground, Mogwai should know all the routes from there. I’ll leave getting to C to you.”

“All right, but...what are you going to do?”

“I’ll play decoy and draw the sniper’s attention to me. My leg’s like this either way, see?”

Yaze spoke in a lighthearted tone as he pointed to his own ankle.

Asagi made a startled gasp as she looked at the bloody wound, her breath catching. It sure didn’t look like he’d been hit by a mere flying fragment. The wound reached close to the bone.

“Motoki... Don’t tell me—you were shot...?!”

“Just a graze. Don’t worry. More to the point, get ready. Mogwai, I’m counting on ya to support Asagi.”

Yaze didn’t give her any time to argue.

She sighed dramatically, wordlessly lowering her posture. She wasn’t wearing running shoes, but she paid it no heed. She concentrated her mind on only one thing: getting across the intersection with all her strength.

“Keh-keh. Leave it to me. Startin’ the countdown. Let’s do this—”

Mogwai began counting the seconds. Yaze took a capsule pill out of his pocket, stuffed it into his mouth, and bit down hard. Asagi closed her eyes and quietly steadied her breaths.

Then the fateful moment arrived.

Carly—the Tartarus Lapse sniper—was a beast person but an exceptionally weak one at that.

She had neither a perfect human form, nor was she able to transform into a beast. No matter how long she grew her hair, it was impossible to hide her large, puppylike beast ears.

Her upper-body strength and agility were around three to five times that of a normal person. As beast people went, it was the very bottom of the scale. It wasn't particularly rare for an ordinary human male who'd done bodybuilding to a certain degree to bench press in Carly's league.

On top of having such a frail physique, Carly had been subjected to harsh abuse from a very young age. She was criticized as incapable and showered with physical violence. Always, in human and demon society both, she was exceptionally alone.

Even when she arrived at a Demon Sanctuary, nothing about her environment changed. Abandoned by both of her birth parents, suffering from hunger, Carly was simply waiting for the cold to grant her a frigid death—and then, December came for her.

So she became a member of Tartarus Lapse, and she learned how to snipe from Senga.

Ironically, her physique meant she had heaven-sent talent as a sniper.

The arm strength to withstand a powerful anti-materiel rifle's recoil, the delicate fingers to manipulate a human weapon—Carly, this so-called weak and frail beast girl, had a perfect individual balance of these two elements. Also, her senses of hearing, smell, and night vision were excellent, even by beast-person standards. As a sniper, she was a potent weapon.

At some point, Carly surpassed even Senga to become Tartarus Lapse's mightiest sniper.

She felt no guilt about killing people whatsoever.

For the first time since birth, her existence had meaning—in assassinating for

this group.

Carly had no interest in Tartarus Lapse's aims. Nor did she bear any grudge against Demon Sanctuaries.

Carly killed people, for no reason save to make December happy.

She kept on sniping, to prove she belonged at December's side. And yet—"Why...?!"

Asagi Aiba dodged the bullet Carly had fired.

It was a precision shot using a faint gap in the guardrail. The angle and timing were both precisely according to her calculations, a blow that should have been absolutely unavoidable. And yet, Asagi Aiba had not been struck.

It was because the boy at Asagi Aiba's side had managed to shield her. He'd moved as if he knew what Carly was doing the whole time.

He probably wasn't a normal human. He had to be using some kind of ability. Maybe it was ritual spells or sorcery—or even Spirit Sight or super senses. Whatever the case, it apparently wasn't a strong enough power to actually stop her shot.

Carly switched rifle magazines. The magazine had a capacity of five shots—and the one she'd just loaded was her last. Despite this, she wasn't nervous. Even if she had one shot remaining, that would be enough. If she put the last bullet into her target, that was victory.

Even if she had to use every last round, she *would* strike down Asagi Aiba—such were Carly's composed thoughts.

"Intercepting...", she murmured to herself, her only audience, as she adopted a firing posture once more.

Asagi Aiba was cutting across the road, trying to enter the building ahead of her. The width of the road, sidewalk included, was about thirty meters. She'd have five to six seconds of available sniping time, plenty to spare as far as Carly was concerned. If she wanted to, she could pump every last round into her target.

It was not logic but instinct that told Carly her prey was on the move.

The first to leap out was the boy accompanying her. It was plainly a diversion—he was a decoy. Carly didn't even place her finger on the trigger. Her breathing did not go astray as she waited for Asagi Aiba to appear. And then—"Urk—?!"

The instant Asagi Aiba leaped out into the intersection, Carly was ever so slightly shaken. A dazzling beam had entered Carly's field of vision through her scope.

Headlights—coming from a number of cars abandoned in the intersection—began pulsating all at once. The completely unexpected glimmering threw off her concentration.

"Hacking...!"

Cars equipped with a remote control-key feature could have their headlights operated even from outside the car. Someone had used that function to impede her attacks.

It was no more than a simple flash in the eyes, but it was decently effective for distracting a sniper.

It took Carly about two seconds to assess the situation. Asagi had already arrived near the center of the intersection. But even so, Carly's overwhelming advantage had not shifted.

As the uniformed girl ran, the beast girl aimed precisely at the hacker's back.

She put her finger on the trigger, applying only a tiny amount of force.

In an instant—"Oh, no, you don't...!"

With a shout that tore through the air, a fierce gust of wind assaulted Carly.

The impact sent her body rolling. Her unleashed bullet bounced off the road, far from its mark.

When Carly, beside herself, rose to her feet, she saw a strange silhouette borne from refraction of the air.

The contours of the silhouette greatly resembled those of the boy protecting Asagi Aiba.

“Air elemental?! No, a wraith?! Do you think that’ll work—?”

Carly drew a weapon from a hip holster. This was a large-caliber automatic pistol—a sidearm for personal defense. Its bullets, bearing high penetration and suppressive power, blasted apart the clone the boy had wrought from the atmosphere. The blow had to have passed through the cloned body, causing a backlash to the caster’s own.

However, the boy’s clone did not relent.

“Wha—?! Destroying a clone should inflict considerable damage to the caster—then, how?!”

With incredible force, the mass of gusting wind reformed, attacking Carly once more. She struggled against the blow as she sprayed the remainder of her bullets at it.

Head. Abdomen. Then heart. She blew away every vital point she could think of.

The mass of gale-force winds fought on, but it no longer had the power to maintain a humanoid form. The hand it stretched toward her dissipated, vanishing from sight.

“I did it... Resuming the assassination.”

She lifted up her rifle once more. Asagi Aiba had already entered the target building. It was no longer possible to snipe her. The only option remaining for Carly was to pursue her and finish her off face-to-face.

But when the assassin tried to drop down from the building, there was a quiet voice in her ear.

“I’m not through with you...!!”

It resembled a whisper from a ghost.

“Eh?!”

Carly’s body wobbled from the powerful impact to her rear. The supposedly destroyed mass of gusting wind took the form of a boy and threw a punch at her.

As a result, the heavy anti-materiel rifle slipped out of her hands. It slammed into the rooftop's fence and proceeded to fall down to the ground.

“My...gun!”

Carly instantly leaned out, trying to grab hold of the rifle.

To Carly, that anti-materiel rifle was the symbol of her link with Tartarus Lapse. If she lost it, her connection to December would be severed, too. This fear robbed Carly of her composure. The opening it left proved decisive.

“Ooooooooooooo—!!”

The mass of wind howled with the boy's voice. Wielding the last of its power, it hurled an invisible shock wave that struck Carly like a sledgehammer.

From the roof of the building she'd chosen as her sniping position, the beast girl floated aloft.

Buffeted by wildly raging air, Carly could not regain her balance. A powerful downward gust slammed the defenseless girl into the ground.

Her small-statured body bounced off the surface.

As she coughed, blood trickled from the girl's lips.

The anti-materiel rifle, broken into several scattered pieces, rolled right beside her. Desperately, she tried to reach a hand out to it, whereupon the exhausted girl's movements came to a halt.

“Not...in a place like this...! ...I'm sorry, December... I...”

Carly, powerless, forgot the agony assailing her entire body.

A vortex of wind passed over her head...and vanished.

10

Collapsed on a sidewalk curb, Motoki Yaze continued to violently vomit. The vomit was red with blood.

The causes were twofold: the damage backlash from Aerodyne being destroyed and overdosing on the boosters.

“...I guess I overdid it a little. Man, this hangover’s a killer...,” Yaze murmured in a sardonic tone as he rolled onto the ground.

His body was already exhausted enough that he couldn’t move, but after everything, that was just peachy to Yaze.

Tartarus Lapse’s sniper had been defeated, and Asagi was already headed to Keystone Gate. He’d somehow managed to protect her. It wasn’t that he was proud of that fact. What he felt was less a sense of accomplishment than relief he’d fulfilled his duties to the barest minimum.

Going the extra mile for Asagi was a trait he’d retained from preschool onward. *High-maintenance childhood friend*, he thought, letting a pained, bloody smile trickle out.

As he did so, a flickering figure drew near.

It was a homunculus boy who possessed an androgynous air. He seemed to be flickering because of the mirages swaying around him. High-temperature air he generated with telekinesis enveloped the boy’s entire body.

“It was you...?”

The homunculus shot Yaze a look brimming with hostility.

Yaze looked back at him with a neutral expression. He simply didn’t understand the question.

“You’re the one who took down Carly?!”

The boy questioned him a second time. Yaze unwittingly let laughter slip. He finally realized just who the boy was.

It was Tartarus Lapse’s pyrokineticist—the serial bomber who blew up an underground parking lot and Yaze’s very own father with it. Yaze owed him revenge for his father, but the boy owed Yaze revenge for his teammate. A Demon Sanctuary wrecking crew member against a Demon Sanctuary hand-raised spy—they’d be trying to kill each other no matter how the two met.

And in that moment, Yaze had no power left to fight him.

He didn’t even have enough stamina left to stand.

“Sorry, I’m leavin’ the rest to you... Don’t make my childhood friend cry, Kojou...”

Like a soliloquy, Yaze murmured his friend’s name as he listlessly closed his eyes. Incandescent flames swirled in vortexes within the boy’s outstretched palms. They were the flames of a homunculus constructed as a military weapon. No doubt they could turn Yaze’s body to ash in a single second.

Nor did the boy seem likely to hold back against a defenseless human opponent.

When they reached a critical mass, the boy unleashed the mass of flames in Yaze’s direction— However, Yaze was not assailed by the impact he had expected.

“Uh...?”

Yaze faintly opened his eyes. His vision was obscured by the sight of wings. Huge, rainbow-colored, radiant wings had spread forth, shielding Yaze from the flames.

“—For once, you have worked rather hard, Motoki Yaze. You have my praise.”

The surprised Yaze heard an arrogant voice behind him. There was a ripple-like shimmer in thin air, and a small, doll-like woman emerged out of the blue.

With a twirl of her lace-edged parasol, Natsuki Minamiya landed.

“Natsuki...? What are you doing here...?”

With a flabbergasted look, Yaze called out his homeroom teacher’s name.

She let out a snort of visible displeasure.

“With that rifle blasting around the city in broad daylight, I could find them in my sleep. Right, Astarte?”

“Affirmative,” replied the homunculus girl appearing with Natsuki in a reverential tone.

The girl was clad in a maid outfit with a particularly open back. The rainbow-colored wings that had saved Yaze had sprouted from her petite shoulder blades. The wings infused with vast demonic energy moved freely, seemingly of

their own will, blocking the flames the serial bomber boy had unleashed.

“You’re called Logi, yes? Now, what will you do?” Natsuki’s challenge was as icy as her tone. “Politely surrender and spit out Takehito Senga’s location, and I will do you no harm.”

“As if I’d—!”

Logi flew into a rage and unleashed his flames once more. However, the effect was the same. Astarte’s wings blocked the flames and proceeded to toss them into a safe direction.

“Not willing to talk, it seems. Then, it cannot be avoided— Astarte, I leave this to you.”

Natsuki commanded the homunculus girl in a dignified voice.

Astarte’s large light-blue eyes wavered as she nodded.

“Accepted.”

That instant, a new wing emerged from Astarte’s back. No—this was no wing, but an arm: a giant Beast Vassal arm longer than Astarte was tall.

The Beast Vassal emerged from within the body of the girl that was its host, adopting a perfect, manlike form: that of a gleaming, rainbow-hued, humanoid Beast Vassal.

“A homunculus, using a Beast Vassal...?! ”

The flames unleashed by Logi assaulted Astarte again and again.

The high temperatures melted the asphalt of the road surface, causing fierce explosions in the ionized air. However, Astarte, enveloped by the Beast Vassal, emerged unscathed despite showing no signs of defending herself.

Astarte was, in truth, a man-made biological experiment in symbiosis with a Beast Vassal—the world’s only homunculus within which such a beast dwelled. Physical attacks were useless against Rhododactylos, her Beast Vassal. The boy’s pyrokinesis was unable to harm Astarte in any way.

“Why?! You’re the same as me, an experiment built to be a weapon, aren’t you?! Then why are you working for a Demon Sanctuary’s sake...?! ”

“Affirmative, you and I are the same.”

Astarte acknowledged Logi’s words. Though her voice was low in intonation, a faintly sad echo was mixed with it.

“I, too, once attempted to destroy this island.”

“Then—”

“It is because *they* stopped me at the time that I was able to meet precious people again, something I thought lost to me.”

Astarte’s eyes should have been emotionless, but there was a glint of powerful will within them. This was not out of emotions of anger or pity toward Logi. It was the powerful desire to save the boy who was of her kind.

“That is why, this time, it is I who shall stop you— Execute, Rhododactylos.”

Astarte’s Beast Vassal threw a punch at the flame-wreathed homunculus boy. The youth’s small physique was sent flying with ease.

“The hell is this...? Dammit all...”

Falling limply onto the road, Logi ceased moving.

Astarte looked down at him for some time, not speaking a single word.

11

December looked longingly at the sea from a lonely plaza.

Once, the place was surely a thriving market bustling with a great many people. Colorful wagons decorated with popular artwork left behind were vestiges of a once-jubilant atmosphere.

However, at that moment, December and Raan were the only ones in the plaza.

A mountain of trash was piled in a corner of the plaza—immobile construction equipment and car parts, and televisions, fridges, and other domestic appliances. Probably, just after Island Old Southeast was condemned, heartless people had used it as an illegal dump.

A brand-new antenna and communications device was mixed in with the trash, active along with a large, waterproof computer. December and the others had hidden them under the rubbish beforehand. One of the network cables connected to the computer stretched under the muffler wrapped around Raan's neck.

"The Priestess of Cain has entered Keystone Gate."

Raan, wearing a thick coat, remained seated with a screen on her lap as she spoke in a voice that varied little.

Through the connectors to her neck and back, she could link her brain directly to the computer network. As a result, Raan had obtained hacking abilities incomparable to those of the average technician. It was because of her that hacking the demon registration bracelets had been possible.

Even so, Asagi Aiba's abilities far outclassed Raan's own.

"Program: Roses of Tartarus network occupation rate has fallen to 77 percent. Responses from four thousand eight hundred demon registration bracelets have been lost."

"I see... So even you can't stop her. That's Asagi Aiba for you..."

December made a lonely smile as she listened to Raan's report.

Even if she had expected as much, Asagi Aiba's arrival at Keystone Gate had greatly changed the state of the battle nonetheless. The virus infecting the demon registration bracelets would be removed: It was just a matter of time. When that happened, the magic circle in the sky would be cut off from its supply of demonic energy, and the Four Holy Beasts would be unable to maintain physical form.

Could they destroy Itogami Island before that happened...? Tartarus Lapse's battle now revolved around that very simple question.

She'd already lost contact with Carly and Logi. The assassination of Asagi Aiba had failed.

"Understood, Raan. You've done enough. Run. It's okay; I'll take care of the rest."

December called out to the girl in the scarf. However, Raan's expression did not change. She shook her head a little and said, "I'm sorry."

"Raan...?"

"I won't run away. I don't want to let go... It feels...good..."

Raan spoke absentmindedly as her mind remained connected to the network. The sight unnerved December. The Priestess entering Keystone Gate meant that C had begun to go active.

It wasn't simply a matter of snatching back control of the demon registration bracelets.

The will of C had begun to infect Raan through the network.

"No, Raan! You're up against a monster with the entire island in its grip. Even your brain can't handle that level of traffic!"

December grabbed Raan's shoulder and gave it a fierce shake. However, Raan did not respond. Her pale skin was showing a rose color as her gaze wandered; she seemed intoxicated.

"So this is...the memory of C... A...ah... It's so pretty..."

"Raan! Cut the connection, Raan!"

As December shrieked, her palm jerked back with a dazzling spark. Unable to cope with the influx of information beyond her brain's limits, Raan's body had begun to go berserk.

"Thank you...December... I...understand..."

"Wait, Raan! Raan, don't go!"

December yanked out the network cables connected to Raan.

That instant, Raan's body fiercely convulsed, tumbling to the ground like a marionette with her strings cut.

"I'm sorry, Raan... I love you so much. Carly, Logi...everyone..."

The girl continued her anguished moans as December laid her down. She gently put the girl's askew scarf back in order and gave her hair a gentle stroke.

“...The inside of Raan’s brain has a nervous system sixteen times more detailed than that of a normal person. It gave her information management capability on par with a military strategic computer.”

December began talking to no one in particular. Her voice carried mysteriously well over the strong coastal breeze.

“Of course, there’s no way a living person’s brain can handle that amount of information. Cellular metabolism alone will burn the nerves out with no time at all. That’s why she was granted a dead body animated by necromancy. I suppose you could call her a Frankenstein Monster—Brain Mod Version.”

Without a sound, December stood up and turned around. Her rainbow-hued, gleaming blonde hair fluttered in the wind, fanning outward. Her blue eyes, radiating like flames, gazed straight toward a single boy.

“Do you really find it strange that I want to destroy the Demon Sanctuaries that gave birth to girls like her? What do you think, Kojou Akatsuki?”

“It’s not up to me to decide that.”

The boy spoke quietly, seemingly cutting all hesitation aside.

The silver-colored, winged dragon had landed in the lonely plaza. It had transported him to that forgotten, ruined artificial isle. Kojou Akatsuki, Fourth Primogenitor... The World’s Mightiest Vampire.

“Maybe those kids have a proper and just reason to be angry. Maybe, just like Senga said, this island’s going to create a huge number of victims.”

Kojou looked up as he spoke. The Four Holy Beasts wrought by the Roses of Tartarus were enveloped by demonic energy flames as they gazed down upon Itogami Island. Their materialization was not complete. Their bestial contours were holding at a level one might call seven-tenths’ worth. That was because Sayaka’s and Shio’s ritual spell cannon attacks had destroyed part of the magic circle, impeding the Four Holy Beasts’ summoning.

Furthermore, the Roses of Tartarus themselves had slowly begun to vanish. The demon registration bracelets were being restored to proper functionality, cutting off the supply of demonic energy from the service. There was no doubting it was Asagi’s work.

“But however much you people wanna destroy Itogami Island, I wanna protect the people living on it just as much! That’s why I’m stopping you here, Tartarus Lapse! From here on, this is *my* fight!”

“That’s your reasoning?! I can’t accept that—!”

December yelled back, digging in against Kojou’s words.

The shadow of a Beast Vassal rose up behind her. The demonic energy unleashed from the Beast Vassal’s eyes caught Kojou’s mind in its grip, causing Kojou’s body to waver. It was a mental attack via Beast Vassal, a powerful will trying not only to take over Kojou’s flesh and blood, but even the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals— It was a dazzling silver flash that cut the powerful, dominating power short.

“No, senpai. This is *our* fight.”

Silver spear raised, Yukina stood to shield Kojou.

The battle at the warehouse district had proven it: December’s attack couldn’t work on Yukina.

That was because Yukina’s Snowdrift Wolf nullified the Beast Vassal’s mind control power.

“Urk!”

Discerning she was at a disadvantage, December stretched a hand toward the mountain of illegally dumped garbage. On her signal, the spell embedded within the garbage activated.

With a vibration like an earthquake, the mountain of garbage swelled up, from which emerged numerous giant humanoids enveloped by metallic scrap. These were golems—Takehito Senga’s Stone Sentinels, wrought via tactical qimen.

With a roar, the golems that had no right to be alive bellowed.

The Stone Sentinels clad in metal armor assaulted Yukina with agility completely at odds with their enormous bodies. But one of the steel golems’ giant arms was smoothly severed, falling to the ground and left behind.

It was not Yukina who had cut the Stone Sentinel’s arm. It was the other

Sword Shaman, wielding a long, silver sword.

“W-we’re here, too, you know...”

Yui landed in front of Kojou and Yukina, meek despite showing up to their aid. As if cheering Yui on, Glenda went “Dah!” and energetically thrust a fist into the air.

December had called forth four Stone Sentinels. These monsters, having trampled the Island Guard once before, were thoroughly thrashed as Yui drove them back. Faced with Yui’s Rosen Chevalier Plus and its pseudo-spatial severing ability, the steel golems’ armor bore no meaning.

December stood rooted to the spot, dumbfounded at the loss of her trump card to the unexpected emergence of an ambusher.

“It’s over, December,” Kojou spat with a glare.

December replied with an undaunted smile. “Not yet, Kojou Akatsuki! Even with the Roses of Tartarus scattered, the summoned Four Holy Beasts still remain. The power summoned by my teammates—the power to destroy Itogami Island!”

“What...?!”

December’s Beast Vassal unleashed its demonic energy, not at Kojou but toward the Four Holy Beasts on standby in the sky above.

The Four Holy Beasts’ summoning remained incomplete. But even if they were only 70 percent materialized, the demonic energy the beasts possessed was vast. If unleashed indiscriminately, Itogami Island would no doubt sustain catastrophic damage.

However, with the Roses of Tartarus lost to them, did Tartarus Lapse have any means left with which to control the beasts...? The instant Kojou harbored that doubt— “Come forth, Dabih Crystallus—!”

For the first time, December completely unleashed her own Beast Vassal.

It was a huge Beast Vassal reaching dozens of meters in length, an ichthyosaur with beautiful, silver crystal scales. It had front legs like translucent wings and radiant, glimmering liquid crystal pillars that spiraled like the horns of

sheep.

The malignant aura enveloping the Beast Vassal greatly resembled those of Kojou's own. The weight of its presence, making the very air tremble—the density of demonic energy—it had a makeup identical to the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor.

December's Beast Vassal could control even the Beast Vassals of Kojou, the World's Mightiest Vampire.

Of course it could. It was one of them.

"A Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, huh...? I figured it'd be something like that..."

Kojou snarled, forced back by the increase in the power of December's demonic energy.

There existed a being capable of controlling the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor besides Kojou, legitimate heir to the power. He knew what she truly was.

"I should have realized it immediately when you called yourself December," Yukina said, her silver spear raised. "In ancient Rome, the New Year began with the third month of the year—therefore, their calendar is two months off from that of the current era. December, a word indicating the twelfth month, would then indicate the tenth month."

"Tenth... The tenth Kaleid Blood, then?" Kojou murmured, pained.

In truth, the Fourth Primogenitor was an artificial vampire created in ancient times as a god-killing weapon. With the time of the war known as The Cleansing long passed, the Fourth Primogenitor was sealed, its duty having come to an end.

The people who feared the revival of the Fourth Primogenitor sealed its twelve Beast Vassals, each in a different place. For the sole purpose of trapping the Beast Vassals inside them, they created new artificial vampires—twelve girls, dubbed the Kaleid Bloods.

"So, December, you were made to seal the Fourth Primogenitor, just like

Avrora...!”

“You really don’t understand anything, do you, Kojou Akatsuki? Not even who you are...”

December giggled, smiling teasingly at him. Her face looked just like that of the girl called Avrora Florestina in the past.

“You might be right.”

Kojou accepted the girl’s words. The ceremony reviving the Fourth Primogenitor had robbed Kojou of the majority of his memories. That’s why he hadn’t realized December’s true nature until the very end.

“Unlike Dodekatos, I awoke long in the past, long enough I can’t remember it clearly. Around forty years ago, I learned of the existence of Tartarus Lapse, and together with them, we destroyed three Demon Sanctuaries. I wasn’t part of the Blazing Banquet, because the Third Primogenitor had me in captivity at the time.”

“The Third Primogenitor... So Giada protected you from all that...”

“Protected... I suppose that was the end result. Thanks to that, I was able to reunite with Raan and the others.”

December lowered her eyes, laughing. Besides her, and the as-yet-unseen Hektos, the other sealing units had all vanished due to the Blazing Banquet, enveloped in the very same Fourth Primogenitor revival ceremony that had laid waste to Island Old Southeast— “The Third Primogenitor released me and told me to go to Itogami Island. She really likes you, Kojou Akatsuki. I think, just a little, I understand why.”

“December—your body’s...”

The small-statured girl’s body was enveloped by golden particles and began to crumble away. This was not the normal vampiric transformation into mist. Her very being was vanishing from the world.

“We, the Numbered, are the very seals of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals—when the seals are released, we can only vanish. I was prepared for this from the moment I decided to come to this island. I am a little

disappointed, though. If the Roses of Tartarus had activated fully, I wouldn't have had to release the seal."

December smiled with a sunny expression. Then, proudly, she pointed a finger overhead. "I sealed—and in some sense, I myself am—Beast Vassal Number Ten, Dabih Crystallus, the Beast Vassal governing the Charm ability vampires possess. That's why I can do...this."

The Four Holy Beasts that had appeared in Itogami Island's sky gathered around, seemingly protecting December.

These Four Holy Beasts had been summoned via Itogami Island acting as a sorcerous device; they were Beast Vassals without any host. With the Roses of Tartarus lost, there ought to have been no one able to control them.

But December's Beast Vassal could dominate even them.

"You say you want to protect Itogami Island? Come and beat me, then. If you can do that, I'll recognize you as the Fourth Primogenitor!"

"December, wait—!"

When Kojou tried to stop her, she collapsed, drained of strength.

The quartet of Holy Beasts controlled by her Beast Vassal moved to take her place.

The target of their attack was Kojou—no, it was the very artificial ground upon which Kojou and the others stood. With the demonic energy the Four Holy Beasts possessed, the backlash from attacking Kojou alone was enough to leave Itogami Island in ruins.

"Shit! C'mon over, Natra Cinereus—!"

Kojou summoned his own Beast Vassal. Enveloped by dense silver mist, the shelled beast intercepted one of the Four Holy Beasts—a pitch-black crocodile with a great maw that seemed to part the very sea as it charged in.

Kojou had no room for holding back, and against these enemies, he didn't have to. Unleashed without limitations, the two masses of demonic energy collided, greatly rocking the already largely destroyed ground of the artificial isle.

The shark's maw tried to bite apart the shelled beast, but, bathed in glimmering demonic energy, it dissipated. Kojou's Beast Vassal held more power than the incompletely materialized Holy Beast.

However, December had more than one of the Four Holy Beasts at her command.

While Kojou's thoughts were on the shark, a crimson bird of prey breathed fire from behind him. That fire transformed into an incandescent fireball, dropping toward Kojou's head.

"Rosen Chevalier Plus—!!"

It was the arc let loose by Yuiri's sword attack that halted the Holy Beast—unleashed fireball in its tracks. It was a wall generated from pseudo-spatial severing. The wall only remained in effect for a single second. However, that was plenty of time for Kojou to regain his balance.

Saved my bacon, Kojou conveyed to Yuiri with a glance as he ferociously bared his fangs.

"C'mon over, Al-Nasl Minium!"

The scarlet bicorn Kojou summoned charged straight into the Four Holy Beasts' bird of prey. Eating the mass of shock waves head-on, the fiery bird of prey's wings scattered in every direction.

However, there was no time to take a breath, for the two remaining Holy Beasts had begun their descent. A pure-white tiger—Byakko—headed at Kojou from above. And the divine dragon—Seiryuu—aimed at Itogami Island itself.

The Four Holy Beasts possessed enough might that even a single direct hit on the center of the artificial isle could sink the entirety of Itogami Island. The other Holy Beast attacks were decoys. Itogami Island had been December's only real target from the start.

Impeded by the white tiger's attack, Kojou could not stop the blue dragon. There was no way he'd make it in time— That instant, when everyone with Kojou shared that despair, a beam of light assailed the divine dragon in its flank.

Another attack immediately followed. Sayaka and Shio were using their ritual

spell cannon attacks.

Of course, even area suppression weapons from the Lion King Agency did not have enough power to defeat the Four Holy Beasts. Even so, the attacks had enough effect to make the blue dragon falter for a second. That second determined Itogami Island's fate.

"Al-Meissa Mercury—!"

With the blue dragon stopped in its tracks, the twin-headed dragon Kojou summoned ripped into its throat. This was a blow from the Dimension Eater, which shaved away space itself. The blue dragon's giant body vanished, unable to even let out a death cry.

Only one of the Four Holy Beasts remained. With the white tiger pressing on him before his very eyes, Kojou turned his right arm, bathed in demonic energy, toward it.

"I, Kojou Akatsuki, inheritor of the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds!"

The enormous white tiger was brought to a halt, seemingly blocked by an invisible wall. The vast demonic energy unleashed by Kojou had staved off the white tiger's advance. The collision of vast demonic energy caused the very air to creak, filling the surrounding area with pale lightning bolts.

But then, Kojou's spell chant halted.

He dropped to his knees then and there, his entire body assaulted by pressure it could not endure.

The abnormal demonic energy of the Four Holy Beasts was attacking Kojou with a mental attack rivaling even the Fourth Primogenitor's magic resistance. It was Dabih Crystallus's mind control. The Charm power of December's Beast Vassals was impeding Kojou from summoning one of his own.

Still, Kojou continued unleashing the power to fend off the white tiger, even as he sustained December's mental attack. It wasn't like back during the battle at the warehouse district. This time, Kojou had overwhelming domination, complete control over his own Beast Vassals. Even December's power could not break that control. It was the effect of the powerful spiritual energy Kojou had

taken into his body—thanks to Yukina’s and Yuiri’s blood.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

Across that battlefield, with vast demonic energy swirling about, a girl’s serene voice echoed forth.

It was Yukina, raising her glowing silver spear high as she broke into a sprint. Her eyes were set upon the Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor covered in quicksilver scales.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

The purging spirit spear with the power to destroy even a vampiric primogenitor impaled December’s Beast Vassal.

The pressure binding Kojou’s entire body vanished, and the air was filled with a pale beam of light.

“C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Five, Regulus Aurum!”

The Beast Vassal, enveloped by a golden radiance, emerged in front of Kojou. In an instant, its roar pulverized the final remaining Holy Beast, burning it down to the last fragment.

This time, the fragmented magic circle swirling in the sky above Itogami Island vanished.

The tremors in the artificial isle halted, and a gentle coastal breeze of stagnant air washed over them. The dazzling rays of the sun illuminated the side of Kojou’s face. Gloomily gazing up at the merciless sunrays, he let out a long sigh.

“Senpai!”

“Kojou!”

“Dah?!”

Yukina and Yuiri, and Glenda, too, rushed toward the wobbly Kojou. *Don’t worry*, spoke the languid smile Kojou shot toward the girls wearing such worried faces.

Seemingly dragging his exhausted body along for the ride, Kojou stood up and slowly walked forward.

His gaze was trained upon the girl enveloped by golden mist.

Looking back at the approaching Kojou, she made an ephemeral smile.

“I guess you win... Kojou...”

“December—”

“I have one final request, Kojou. Raan and the others...Carly and Logi... I want you to get them to a proper research agency. At this rate, those kids aren’t going to live very long...”

“...Got it.”

Kojou gave a strong nod that seemed to say *It’s a promise*. There was no need to even say it out loud. He couldn’t just let them die. Their crimes were too numerous for that. On top of paying for those crimes, they would get another chance. A chance for them, demonic abuse victims, to live happy lives...

Surely, on Itogami Island, that would be possible. After all, the island was a Demon Sanctuary— “I made a promise, Kojou. I grant you the power of the tenth Beast Vassal.”

“Wait, hold on... December... I never asked for...”

Kojou picked up her small, fading body. Kojou hadn’t fought her to take her power for himself. He didn’t want her to disappear.

But all December did was narrow her eyes in amusement.

“It’s all right. You don’t have to make a sad face like that. After all, I’ll always be by your side... So before my mind vanishes, I choose to be inside of you—”

“December...!”

Strength faded from December’s fingertips as they reached out, touching Kojou’s cheek. She transformed into golden mist, vanishing within his arms.



“You protected the Twel... Avrora, Kojou Akatsuki. She is your hope... That’s why I...”

Those were the final words of the tenth Kaleid Blood—the final words of December.

From behind Kojou, without a single word, Yukina and the others watched as Kojou silently bit his lip.

12

“So you are no more... December...”

Takehito Senga quietly murmured as he sensed the auras of the Four Holy Beasts dissipate.

The lines of power coursing in and around Itogami Island were returning to their normal state. The Roses of Tartarus had disintegrated, and Senga’s Eight Trigrams Formation lay broken. It was safe to assume that December had fought the Fourth Primogenitor and lost, already absorbed by Kojou Akatsuki.

He knew for certain that Carly, Logi, and Raan had already lost. Tartarus Lapse had been defeated.

“The Fourth Primogenitor’s power rivals even that of the Four Holy Beasts... It seems he is not called the World’s Mightiest Vampire for nothing. But this, too, serves Tartarus Lapse’s objectives. Isn’t that right, December?”

Senga was murmuring to himself, just for his own benefit, as he stepped into a corridor. The place Senga headed toward was the nucleus of Itogami Island—Keystone Gate’s bottom floor.

This was where the keystone linking Itogami Island’s four gigafloats together had been placed. Once, an Armed Apostle of Lotharingia had assaulted that place with a particular objective in mind. Had he destroyed the keystone, Itogami Island’s own mass would collapse upon itself. It was Itogami Island’s greatest vulnerability.

The block was strictly sealed away, and one hand was excessive for counting who could step into the chamber. Even the vaunted Natsuki Minamiya, with the

power to control space, could not enter without advance permission. The interior of Keystone Gate was covered in powerful walls, and numerous barriers had been layered atop one another to repel intruders. It was said that the only ones able to lift those barriers were Senra Itogami, designer of Itogami Island, and his famously close friend, Akishige Yaze.

“Ah, that’s right. There was one more exception.”

“—?!”

The voice suddenly reverberated in the supposedly desolate corridor, causing Senga to halt in surprise.

It had echoed from Senga’s intended destination. In other words, it reverberated from Keystone Gate’s bottom floor.

“Senra Itogami’s sealing ceremony was performed by an influential feng shui practitioner working at a university in Europe at the time... Your mentor, I suppose? Naturally, you would have access to that data. Isn’t that right, Takehito Senga?”

“How...did you know I would come here...? No...”

Senga howled as he glared at the figure appearing before him. He subconsciously drew his concealed pistol.

A man wearing traditional Japanese clothing gazed up with a sharp look in his eyes, watching Senga’s consternation with visible delight.

He was about fifty years old. He certainly was not a large man, but his presence felt incredibly powerful. He gave off an air reminiscent of a sword master from the middle ages.

“How are you alive, Akishige Yaze?!” Senga asked in a raspy voice.

Because there stood a man who should have been buried under a pile of rubble from an underground parking lot set to explode.

It was Akishige Yaze, the Honorary Chairman of the Gigafloat Management Corporation...and the one man standing in the way of Tartarus Lapse’s plans.

Senga didn’t wait for Akishige Yaze to reply before pulling the trigger of his pistol. However, Senga’s bullets were deflected before ever reaching his

opponent's body, sparks scattering in their wake.

It was as if a blade invisible to the naked eye had struck every last one of them down—

“I see... You're...a Hyper Adapter...!”

Senga's cheek twitched when he realized the true nature of the indecipherable phenomenon.

Akishige Yaze was a natural-born psychic who did not rely on sorcery or spellcraft.

Naturally, that power did not require a spell incantation, so there was no time lag before it activated. It was doubtlessly due to that power that he had survived the explosion in the underground parking lot.

“Sealing off Itogami Island, throwing the Gigafloat Management Corporation into chaos, and purging it of dissenting elements—you and your people have done truly fine work. You have my thanks.”

“What...?”

Akishige Yaze's dignified voice made Senga's shoulders quake in terror. The man before his eyes was *thanking* Senga and the others...for good work that had lived up to his lofty expectations.

“It can't be... You used us—from the very beginning...”

As Senga spoke, fierce pain ran through him as if his body was on fire. It was an attack from Akishige Yaze's unseen blade. Countless more blades assailed Senga's staggering body.

Fresh blood spewed forth. He crumpled on the spot.

“Now everything has been put in order. You've been of great service, Tartarus Lapse.”

Akishige walked past the fallen Senga, proceeding on his way.

Senga let out a despairing murmur as he reached a hand out toward the man's back.

“Wait, Akishige Yaze... Do you, descendants of the Sinful God...truly desire the

slaughter of demons this much?!”

Akishige Yaze did not reply to Senga’s question. All that reached Senga’s ears were the man’s ever-receding footsteps.

In his mind, growing faint from blood loss, Senga finally realized the error he had committed. Tartarus Lapse’s entire existence had been a mistake. And it was too late...for everything.

“U...uoooooooooooo———!!”

Senga’s sad, painful scream reverberated across the desolate corridor. The sound of his lament heralded the beginning.

Of everything.



OUTRO

OUTRO

Everything was over by the time Natsuki arrived.

The Island Guard's surveillance, finally recovered from the chaos, detected an anomaly inside Keystone Gate. Natsuki had been dispatched to apprehend the intruder.

Then, when she arrived on the scene, Natsuki saw the blood-ridden, fallen form of Takehito Senga.

"Hey there, Natsuki... So you can already move again... I'm glad."

Senga looked up at Natsuki, speaking as he continued his labored breaths.

Natsuki's expression did not shift as she surveyed his wounds. There were countless lacerations and puncture wounds over his entire body. Many of them had reached the inner organs. The amount of blood loss had long exceeded dangerous levels. It was practically a mystery how he was even still conscious. They were most certainly fatal wounds.

"Who did this?"

Natsuki did not ask *Why are you here?* The simple fact that he'd visited the lowermost level of Keystone Gate made plain what Senga had attempted to do. The problem was because someone had awaited his arrival and defeated him.

"As you are now, even if I tell you, what can you do about it?" Senga smirked.

From his words, Natsuki realized it. The one who had hurt Senga was someone Natsuki couldn't lay a hand upon—in other words, a human being from the Demon Sanctuary's government. Senga was concealing the name of his foe so Natsuki would not suffer.

"Hold on, I'll get you to a hospital immediately."

"Don't bother. There's no need."

Senga rejected Natsuki's offer. Even the medical technology of the Demon Sanctuary could no longer save him. That was something Senga himself understood.

“We’ve apprehended all other members of Tartarus Lapse besides the Tenth. All are heavily wounded but in stable condition.”

“Is that so?”

The news as stated by Natsuki brought an expression of relief over Senga.

“Then, I am sorry, but please, take care of them. I’m sure you understand, but I was simply using them as tools for my own ends. They bear no guilt themselves.”

“I will convey your testimony to that fact,” Natsuki said in a businesslike tone.

“That’s fine.” Senga nodded.

Senga was thinking of his comrades. When the surviving members of Tartarus Lapse were tried, Senga’s testimony would no doubt be to their benefit. Whether it was true was another matter.

“Fifteen years ago—I was disappointed when you completed your revenge alone and vanished from our midst. But now that I think back on it...you were the one who did the right thing.”

Senga appeared wistful.

When he coughed, clots of blood spilled out from his lips. The stink of death began to hover in the passageway.

“When I taught those kids how to kill, I became dependent on them. I suppose it was codependency. And you realized that, Natsuki.”

Senga took a tiny chip out from behind the collar of his jacket. It was a microchip for storing data. With his bloody, shaking fingers, he offered it to her.

“Your pupils chose to protect the Demon Sanctuary of their own will... Their decision is foolish, but even I was impressed, if only a little. You are blessed with fine students.”

“...This is?”

“To the victor goes the spoils, correct? How you use the contents...is up to you.”

When he saw that Natsuki had taken the chip, Senga quietly closed his eyes. A

faint smile came over his lips.

“Even though I lost, this isn’t a bad feeling... I’m glad that you...stopped me...”

Strength drained from Senga’s body. Natsuki gazed upon him with an unreadable expression.

“Farewell, Teacher.”

Space itself seemed to sway like a ripple. Natsuki vanished.

All that remained in the dimly lit, desolate corridor were traces of a pool of blood.



The azure sky stretched overhead. It was the familiar blue sky of the Demon Sanctuary.

The crimson magic circle that ought to have buried the sky had disintegrated, and all sight of the Four Holy Beasts that had emerged from it had vanished. And so, Koyomi Shizuka, one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, gazed dumbfounded up at that sky.

Tartarus Lapse’s attack, which ought to have destroyed Itogami Island, had at some point ended just as suddenly as it had begun. She no doubt had the exploits of Kojou Akatsuki and his friends to thank for that.

She had been unable to do anything.

Everything had ended in a place beyond Koyomi’s reach.

“We’re...saved...?”

Koyomi’s frail murmur was mixed with inconcealable pain. Several of her ribs had been broken, and her internal organs had likely been damaged as well. Even slightly moving her body sent intense pain running up her left leg and right arm. Her uniform was in tatters; the white fabric was dyed red from bleeding.

Even so, just barely, Koyomi had lived.

The remains of scorched steel girders had tumbled all around her. The air was filled with the detestable stench of burnt resin. They were the remnants of an anti-ground laser attack fired from the Earth’s orbit.

And the place Koyomi was lying in was Island North's second stratum— Under the artificial ground's surface.

“By attacking yourself, the laser did not directly strike you? I should have expected as much, Paper Noise.”

As she lay, unable to move, Koyomi heard a man's theatrical tone.

The silhouette that floated up amid the sunlight was that of a tall, slender aristocrat. He was looking down at Koyomi from overhead, his mouth popping open at the traces of the destruction the laser cannon attack had wrought.

The instant she realized she could not evade the laser satellite attack, Koyomi had activated the ability dubbed Paper Noise—the absolute right to attack first.

Her target had been the ground at her own feet—and her own flesh.

It had been sheer coincidence that she'd encountered Meiga Itogami in Island North, but Koyomi's salvation had been the result. After all, North, a laboratory district, was the only district with multilayered construction—and extensive space underground. Paper Noise did not allow the ability to move while time was stopped. Even if Koyomi was attacking someone during time never meant to exist, she could not move her own body while doing so. That was why Kojou Akatsuki and Meiga Itogami had chosen tactics aimed at mutually assured destruction.

However, that rule had an exception. That was when Koyomi directed an attack at *her very own body*.

When the laser-cannon attack was pouring down, Koyomi was already out of the satellite's target area. Through her guaranteed first attack, Koyomi had bored a hole in the ground and hurled her own flesh to the bottom of it.

The wounds carved into Koyomi's entire body were from her attack upon herself and the impact of the resulting fall.

Thus, at no small cost, Koyomi had survived.

“Dimitrie...Vattler...”

Exposed to his gaze, wounded and defenseless, Koyomi called out the young aristocrat's name.

In her current state, Koyomi had no power to fight him. After all, she was on the verge of death without him having to lift a finger.

Even so, Koyomi was not afraid. That was because a single suspicion dominated her thoughts.

“Why...did you—?”

—*watch while doing nothing*, Koyomi wanted to ask him. Tartarus Lapse, the demon sanctuary wrecking crew; the Four Holy Beasts they had summoned; and the tenth Kaleid Blood— Surely, from the point of view of a battle maniac like Vattler, they were foes well worth fighting. And yet, Vattler had stayed his hand until the very end.

Koyomi found that suspicious.

“I’m waiting. Waiting until the time is right.”

The young aristocrat’s reply was very simple.

It was all Koyomi needed to hear in order to understand everything.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t fought. He was simply waiting—waiting for the preparations to be complete. Waiting for the powerful enemy he needed to engage in battle to obtain power suitable for the part.

“This makes ten... Shall we finally begin, Paper Noise?”

Dimitrie Vattler—aristocrat of the Warlord’s Empire—smiled handsomely as he looked up at the sky.

Upon hearing his words, Koyomi felt a faint tremble of despair.

Begin. Yes, it would begin. Here, in this Demon Sanctuary.

The Feast would recommence— †

An Island Guard patrol boat was what picked Kojou and the others up from the abandoned district. Sayaka and the others had arranged it through the Lion King Agency.

At first, Glenda had been in high spirits, but that moment, she was asleep on Yui’s lap.

She’d literally flown all the way to Itogami Island. It was small wonder she was

that tired.

The Four Holy Beasts had disintegrated about three hours prior, but the city seemed to have largely regained its usual calm.

The damage to buildings was severe, but the number of casualties was surprisingly small. It was less that the city excelled at public order than the citizens took shelter with an abnormal degree of speed and precision. Everyone was used to emergency situations of that degree. After all, they were residents of Itogami Island—the populace of a Demon Sanctuary.

“Good grief... We’re finally back...”

Kojou listlessly murmured as he looked up at the landscape of Itogami Island from the water’s surface. The patrol boat was arriving at the harbor.

The first to be carried away was Raan, lying on a stretcher with shackles attached. Even then, she continued to sleep, possibly in a coma. There was nothing abnormal with her body itself, so she seemed to remain in a dreaming state. It was no doubt coming into contact with vast amounts of “information” through the network—at least, that’s what Yukina and the others had diagnosed through their Spirit Sight.

“So what’s gonna happen to them?”

Kojou let out a long sigh as he watched Raan go, eyes still shut.

She and the other members of Tartarus Lapse had attempted to destroy Itogami Island of their own free will. It was fundamentally different from Astarte and Yuuma, who’d simply been used by people they could not defy. On top of that, Tartarus Lapse was subject to an international arrest warrant for very serious crimes, and on top of *that*, they were unregistered demons; worst case, it was entirely possible they’d be sent to the Prison Barrier—an eternal prison where they would be isolated in perpetuity.

“Of course, their crimes cannot simply be wiped away, but I believe there is room to take their environment into account as extenuating circumstances.” Yukina addressed Kojou’s worry with her usual all-too-serious tone. “Besides, all of Itogami Island’s residents are witnesses. It is not like the time of the Iroise Demon Sanctuary, so—”

“They can’t just cover up the incident and quietly get rid of ’em, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Kojou’s murmur brought a nod from Yukina. Certainly, it wasn’t bad information to have. Even the Gigafloat Management Corporation couldn’t punish Raan and the others any way it wished, never mind having them assassinated in prison or the like.

“We also sent a request through the Lion King Agency to get their sentences reduced. Officially, Shio’s and Kirasaka’s efforts suppressed the Four Holy Beasts, so maybe we can expect something from it?” Yuiri offered as consolation.

Kojou showed her a modest smile. “That’s a big help. I did promise December and all.”

December had left the fate of Raan and the others to Kojou. Besides, Kojou had reasons of his own to be mindful of them.

Takehito Senga and December had said Itogami Island’s existence would bring about a great many casualties.

They would be the only ones that might know why. Kojou *had* to find out the reason December tried to destroy Itogami Island, risking her own continued existence in the process.

Asking them was his only way.

“Well then, how ’bout we head off, too? Hey, Glenda, wake up; we’re here.”

Kojou tried to wake up the sleeping Glenda so they could get off the boat. Glenda, still looking quite asleep, lazily lifted up her head and turned it side to side. Then, Yuiri tried to get up, but she lost her balance and stumbled forward.

“Wah,” she exclaimed, almost falling over when Kojou, right next to them, caught her.

“Are you all right, Yuiri?”

“K-Kojou?! Sorry, my legs fell asleep.”

“Your legs? Ah...”

So that was it, Kojou realized. Thanks to Glenda using her lap as a pillow for so long, her legs had fallen asleep.

“Got it. Just stay like that for a second, ‘kay?”

“Eh? Kojou...?”

Yui blinked as Kojou picked her up in a so-called bridal carry pose.

Seeing this from close by, Yukina uttered “Senpai?!” as her eyes bulged wide.

“Kojou?! Wh-what are you...?!”

“Getting you on land, for starters. This boat’s rockin’ a fair bit, so wobbly legs are dangerous. I’ll, ah, stop if you want though...”

“I—I don’t mind... I think. I was just a little, ah, surprised, but it’s kinda nice?”

Yui put her arms around Kojou’s neck as she glanced at Yukina behind him. Yukina clearly had a sour expression as she glared sullenly at Kojou. However, Kojou didn’t pick up on that.

“I’m totally in your debt this time around, Yui. Sorry for making you do somethin’ like that...”

“Y-yeah. It was an emergency, so it couldn’t be helped, huh?”

Yui’s cheeks reddened as she shook her head. The bite marks Kojou had embedded into her neck had largely vanished. All that remained was a faint redness that looked like a spot where she’d been kissed.

“But next time, I’d like you to be a little gentler. This was my first time, so I was a bit scared...,” Yui whispered, almost absentmindedly, like she hadn’t even realized that she’d said it out loud.

“Next time...?” Kojou unwittingly echoed back.

“Next time...?” Yukina repeated, her brows shaking a little.

Then, as Kojou tilted his head, a silver glint filled with killing intent raced past with a *whoosh*.

“—Er, nuoo?!”

Kojou let out a brief yelp as he stopped moving, practically frozen in place. A

metallic spell arrow impaled into the ship's hull with a dull *thud*.

It was a short-haired girl wielding a silver recurve bow who had unleashed the arrow. Shio Hikawa, standing on the wharf with a fearsome visage, glared at Kojou as he held Yuiri in his arms.

"Fourth Primogenitor! Damn you, what have you done to Yuiri, you beast?!"

"Sh-Shio?!!"

A figure deftly landed immediately behind the shocked Shio. Sayaka Kirasaka's long ponytailed hair danced in the wind as she turned the tip of her long sword toward Kojou.

"Kojou Akatsukiiii... Don't tell me, you made us fight, snuck off, and performed indecent acts behind our backs...!"

"Miss Kirasaka...?! Wait, you're wrong; that was—"

"Out of my way, Yuiri Haba! I'm cutting down this pervert!"

"Wait, Kirasaka. I'm finishing him off!"

"Shio, quit it already. I didn't hate it, and it didn't hurt that much—"

Thoroughly flustered, Yuiri's excuses further fanned the flames of Shio's and Sayaka's anger. Glenda, not particularly understanding the circumstances, excitedly shouted, "Dah, dahh!"

"Himeragi, could you explain the circumstances to them? Please?"

Backed into a corner, Kojou sought Yukina's aid. It was a fact that he'd engaged in vampiric acts with Yuiri, but that was an inescapable choice for the sake of resisting December's mind control. Furthermore, it was Yukina who had proposed the method to Kojou.

However, Yukina gazed coldly with half-lidded eyes at Kojou—still carrying Yuiri in his arms—and exhaled.

"I would not know."

"Hey!"

"—After all, I am merely your watcher. So go on ahead and keep pampering all the other people, stupid senpai!"

“The hell?!”

What did I do? thought Kojou, despondent as he gazed at Yukina, who was clearly in a sour mood.

Shio’s and Sayaka’s angry voices echoed as Yuiri desperately tried to talk them down. Then, Glenda’s voice echoed, too—she just found it all funny. Listening to everyone, Kojou blithely stared at the sky.

“Gimme a break...”

Kojou’s frail murmur was carried away by a coastal breeze and vanished.

He felt like he faintly heard laughter—from a girl who had called herself December.



Keystone Gate, Floor Zero— Asagi Aiba was standing still in the back of the room dubbed C.

“No way... This is...”

It was a chilly, dimly lit room. The breaths Asagi let out turned white as they froze over...

She was staring at a vast, spiraling room spread before her gaze.

The stone slabs that walled C were filled to the brim, inscribed with unfamiliar writing—writing that had never existed within all of human history.

A record left by someone beyond humankind. Notation. Memory. Information — “This is C... Cain’s...coffin...,” Asagi murmured, voice trembling.

In a world of sorcery, where reality was overwritten according to the caster’s will, information was power itself.

Shikigami, familiars, and homunculi—born from alchemical knowledge—were no exceptions to this rule.

Information birthed money. Information birthed creation and destruction. Information birthed life, and even...gods.

Then what would the information sealed up in that room, information that ought not exist, create?

If she had to name one thing capable of memorizing and processing such vast information, it would have to be— “Mogwai...you’re...!” shouted Asagi Aiba, the girl called the Priestess of Cain.

As if responding to her lingering echo, the writing engraved upon the stone slabs faintly began to glow.

There was a voice amid the darkness, synthetic yet strangely humanlike. It laughed, seemingly to mock her.

“Keh-keh...”

Afterword

Hi, it's been a while—about four months. Just as promised in last volume's afterword, the publication pace has been increased just a smidgeon (*smugly smiles yet again*). However, as you might expect, this time was a little rough.

So there you have it, *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 13 has reached stores.

This time, the theme was returning to the point of origin. As the previous volume and the one before that were irregular developments, I consciously pounded out as much of a *Strike the Blood*-like episode for this volume as I could manage. For instance, expounding on the special nature of the artificial isle and Demon Sanctuary as a stage, the secrets of the being known as the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou and Yukina facing their various pasts, Yaze's and Natsuki's pasts coming to the fore, and so forth. Also, Asagi having a bad day is pretty much a rule of thumb in *Strike the Blood*... Well, setting that aside, if you had fun with it, I'm glad.

Now then, let's talk about the new characters. Personally, I rather liked the various people of Tartarus Lapse taking the stage this time around, and they were a lot of fun (and just a little tough) to write. Each have experienced the negative side of a world where humans and demons coexist; I think that with one step in a different direction, it's possible they'd be on the main characters' side. And I bet it'd be fun to portray their day-to-day lives that they acted were like no big deal. I'd be glad if, once the Tartarus Lapse members made their choices, everyone was invested in seeing through what Kojou's and Yukina's responses would be—and where those responses would lead.

Moving on, this has already been publicly announced, but a new OVA is being made to continue the previous TV anime version of *Strike the Blood*. Let me thank all of you who have been cheering me on. The story will be completely original, and I helped just a wee bit. Various other developments, including a new drama CD, are in the works, so best regards for all your support going forward.

Furthermore, the *Monthly Dengeki Daioh* serialized comic version of *Strike the Blood* is still ongoing—on sale up to Volume 6. Everyone is really worked up to

see Kanon and La Folia finally onstage (oh, the tension!). You can even read the latest chapters online, so by all means, please check it out. To TATE-sensei handling the comic version, thank you very much, as always.

Also, a thank you to Manyako, handling the illustrations, you were truly a great help once again at a very busy time. In particular, this volume's color illustrations were even more marvelous, to the point I had a nosebleed in real life. And wow, Yaze was a real stud there, too.

Also, allow me to offer my thanks from the bottom of my heart to everyone involved in the creation and distribution of this book.

Of course, I also thank all of you readers who have read this book with everything I have.

Well then, I hope to see you all next volume.

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A full-page illustration of a young girl with long dark hair and bangs, wearing a white sailor-style top with a blue collar and a large blue bow, and a blue and white plaid skirt. She has a purple rose in her hair and is standing barefoot in shallow, rippling water. The background is a night scene with a large, bright full moon, dark clouds, and a distant shoreline with some lights. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, purples, and pinks.

13

Gakuto
Mikumo

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE ROSES OF TARTARUS